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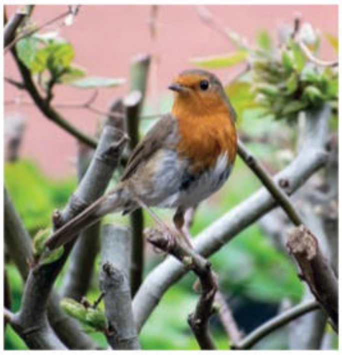

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2 Secure spring bulb-planting success with Toby Buckland's tips

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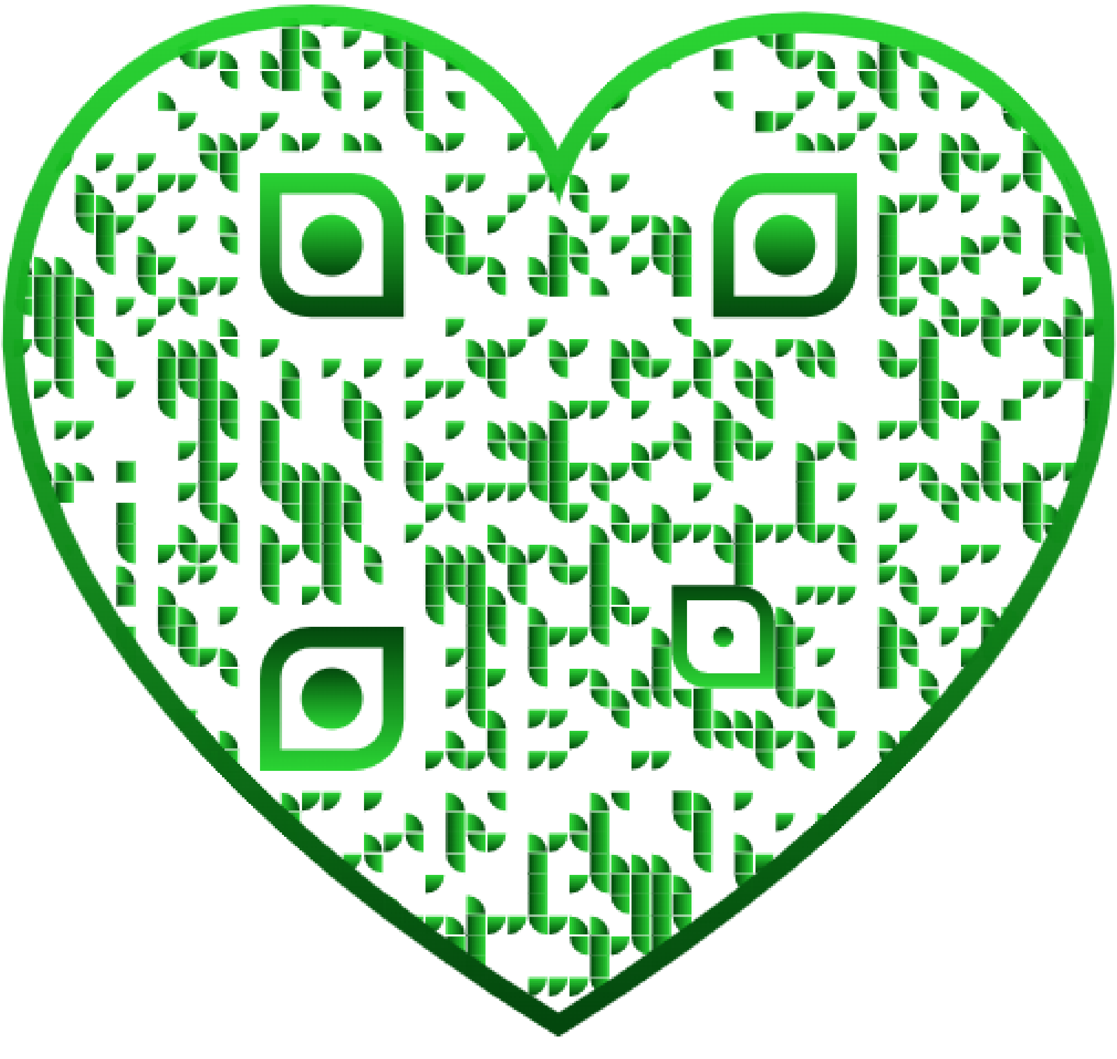

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Amateur Gardening 141 years of practical advice
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A warm welcome

Simple pleasures

I don't know about you, but I'm always a little taken aback each year at how quickly the evenings seem to draw in after the clocks go back. How soon it is that the skies darken, especially when there is rain and the light levels dip. As gardeners we are so connected with the seasons and the weather at hand, no matter how erratic, and this time of year we slowly but surely start to feel our energy levels slump a little as the natural world slows and the daylight hours diminish.

Nowadays, of course, we have electric street and house lights which artificially extend the light for our everyday modern lifestyles. Our ancestors, meanwhile, would simply sleep more and hunker down against the season, and we still have that in us a little as we rush around starting to prepare for the busyness of the festival season ahead. There is a lot of fun to be had, but also a lot of pressure to spend, spend and spend.

Yet the simple pleasures offer so much and I think it's important to embrace that as much as we can. To stop, slow and seek out the natural world and garden in all its late-season glory. From getting excited about rich, golden leaf mould piles and beautiful seed heads and berries, to watching the garden birds (our winter mental health allies) excitedly fluttering about on feeders, beds and borders in search of a good meal.

This year has been so abundant in the garden, with leaves and fruits in ample supply. There has been much to be grateful for, especially the late season sunshine and milder weather. Safely wrapped up against the elements, especially protecting our extremities and core, we can take time to garden more gently as we potter, ponder and plan now for the seasons to come. There is much renewal in rest and much to appreciate in the slowing down of the garden, the regeneration of life and new growth and abundance to come. In this simple natural grounding, hope surely springs external.

In this issue our merry band of brilliant expert *AG* contributors include Ruth Hayes, Bob Flowerdew, Sue Bradley, Graham Clarke, Anne Swithinbank, Lucy Chamberlain, Michael Perry, John Negus, Mike Palmer, Stephanie Hafferty, Liz Zorab, Nick Hamilton, Rosie Irving, Toby Buckland and Ellen Mary.

We hope you enjoy everything we have put together for you.

Please keep writing in. We love receiving your ideas, letters, questions, musings and poems. The spirit of *AG* continues rejuvenated, working towards a brighter green future for us all, together.

Kim x

Kim Stoddart *AG*'s editor-in-chief

ISSN: 0954-8513

Amateur Gardening
Kelsey Publishing Ltd.
The Granary, Downs Court, Yalding Hill,
Yalding, Maidstone, Kent, ME18 6AL

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UK Subscriptions 01959 543747
https://shop.kelsey.co.uk/amateur-gardening-magazine

Distribution in UK
Frontline Distribution Solutions
2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT

Distribution in Northern Ireland & Republic of Ireland
Newspread Tel: +353 23 886 3850

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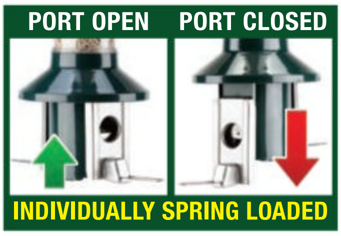

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1884 The world's oldest gardening magazine 2025

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Kim offers more down-to-earth resilient gardening advice

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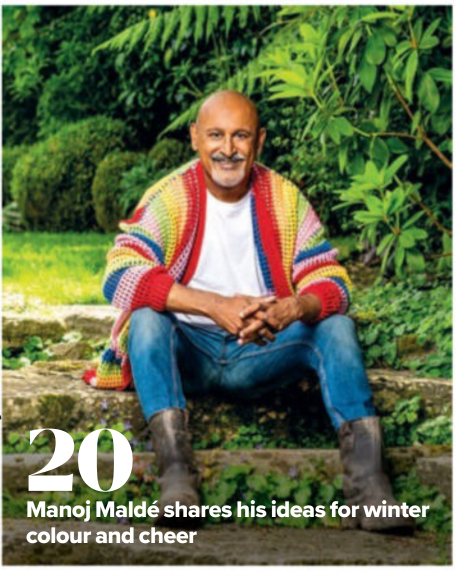

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13 December 2025

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Your NEWS FORTNIGHT

Bringing you some of the gardening news highlights

THE
ALAN PARTRIDGE
SOUND BATH GARDEN

The award-winning sound garden can be visited at the Pensthorpe nature reserve in Norfolk

Aha! TV star donates garden to nature

Alan Partridge sound garden goes to Norfolk reserve

A sound garden created to celebrate the launch of a podcast by fictional TV superstar Alan Partridge has been donated to a nature reserve in his beloved Norfolk.

The gold award-winning garden that was opened at this year's RHS Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival came with a speaker system broadcasting some classic Partridge soundbites.

It has now been redesigned to transform natural surroundings into sound at the Pensthorpe nature reserve, near Fakenham, in Norfolk.

The Hampton Court showpiece was designed by Partridge creator and actor Steve Coogan with Norfolk-based Carey Garden Design Studio. Sound artist Justin Wiggan then converted it into a bio-sonification garden for Pensthorpe.

Speakers, tubes, pipes and water features will produce sounds at different frequencies across Pensthorpe, and the garden has been planted with an assortment of plants native to Norfolk.

Pensthorpe's Managing Director Ben Marshall said: "Being able to get this gift and turn it into what we've got now - it's something we're really proud to be the custodian of and it will absolutely enhance the visitor experience."

The Alan Partridge character started life as a radio sports presenter and is now a fully fledged star with his own 'mockumentary' series about mental health.

ACORN VASE
ACORN VASE

Celebrate Britain's heritage with the gift of a Blenheim acorn

Grow an oak this Christmas

Give a unique gift this Christmas that will enable the recipient to produce a sapling from an acorn gathered from the historic Blenheim Estate.

Each boxed gift contains a specially designed vase, a Blenheim-grown acorn, simple instructions on how to prepare and propagate it, and a booklet about the palace's ancient oak trees.

Blenheim's Rural Estates Manager James Hunter said: "We love how the vases allow you to watch the growing process in such detail, and by the time the acorn is 'used up', you have your very own little sapling."

The vase was designed by London-based Ilex Studios and further details are available at www.blenheimpalace.com/estate

Miimo mowers range to expand

Honda has added two robotic lawn mowers to its prestigious line-up: the Miimo 1500i and Miimo 2200i.

The new wireless additions to the range will eliminate the need for physical boundary wires, allowing users to easily map and define mowing zones using a dedicated smartphone app, significantly reducing setup time.

Available from spring 2026, they will deliver highly accurate mowing and seamless remote-control functionality.

Right: Miimo 1500i and Miimo 2200i will be available in early 2026

Anya brings magic as new National Garden Scheme ambassador

Bestselling author and social media star Anya Lautenbach is the newest ambassador for the National Garden Scheme (NGS).

The scheme, which was launched in 1927, gives visitors unique access to over 3,500 exceptional private gardens in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Channel Islands.

The NGS raised more than £3.5 million for nursing and health charities in 2024 alone.

Anya, also known as Anya The Garden Fairy, said: "I'm thrilled and honoured to be asked by the National Garden Scheme to become one of their ambassadors."

NGS Chief Executive Dr Richard Claxton said: "Having Anya join our team of ambassadors is wonderful news. She is a force for good."

Above: Bestselling author and social media star Anya Lautenbach has joined the NGS

AG readers can save £2 on the iconic *NGS Garden Visitor's Handbook 2026,* your essential guide to 3,500 fabulous private gardens opening across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Channel Islands. Order yours for just £12.99 (RRP £14.99) using the code **AGM26** at ***www.ngs.org.uk/shop***

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First report shows the importance of our gardens

RHS highlights the significance of the UK's green spaces

Our gardens play an important part in the UK's economy, wellbeing and food security

The scale, diversity and impact of gardening, and the vital role it plays in shaping a greener, healthier and more resilient future, has been laid bare in the *RHS State of Gardening Report* 2025.

The publication, the first of its kind, maps 25.8 million gardens across Great Britain and reveals how their upkeep is key to nurturing biodiversity, strengthening climate resilience and supporting health, wellbeing and the economy.

Private and public gardens cover 4.6% of the total UK land area. In general, gardens across the UK contribute £38 billion to the economy, support more than 722,000 jobs and help boost physical and mental wellbeing - often as part of NHS referral schemes.

Environmentally, the UK's gardens contain over 50 million trees, have captured an estimated 158 million tonnes of carbon and are home to half the UK's butterflies and 40% of our wild birds.

Community gardens are also becoming increasingly important, especially in urban areas, helping with social cohesion and encouraging all ages to grow their own produce.

"*The RHS State of Gardening Report 2025* reveals the extraordinary scale, diversity and impact of gardening," said Clare Matterson, RHS Director General.

The RHS is advocating that gardens are embedded across health, housing, education, climate and biodiversity strategies, and environmental horticulture recognised as a vital green skill.

It is also calling for greater investment in training and infrastructure, and says research is needed to secure the sector's future and unlock environmental horticulture's potential to deliver national benefits.

The full report can be read at www.rhs.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/rhs-state-of-gardening

Early showing for unusual snowdrops

The long dry summer may have perturbed many gardeners, but it's been a boon for rare Mediterranean snowdrops that have put in an early appearance in Devon.

Visitors and gardeners have been amazed to see snowdrops in bloom at the Garden House near Yelverton, weeks ahead of their expected appearance. Expert gardeners put the early snowdrops down to the UK's long dry summer.

Head gardener Nick Haworth said: "We've got around 400 varieties of snowdrops at The Garden House and while it's not unusual to see the odd Mediterranean snowdrop popping its head up in autumn, we've never seen so many in October.

"It's pretty clear that the reason is the long dry summer followed by autumn rainfall. This is close to the conditions these snowdrop varieties experience in their natural habitats."

The garden's 2026 Snowdrop Festival opens to visitors on January 9 and will continue for around 10 to 12 weeks.

For more details, visit: www.thegardenhouse.org.uk.

Above: The warm summer coupled with autumn rain has sparked the early flowering

© John Richmond

Enjoy an explosion of colour at this year's Kew Orchid Festival

Orchid festival returns for 30th year

The Orchid Festival at Kew Gardens returns in 2026 with a spectacular display inspired by Chinese heritage and biodiversity.

Highlights will include a Chinese dragon formed from lotus seed heads and a display of orchid plants and dried leaves winding across the central pond, surrounded by golden bowls overflowing with yellow and orange orchids, inspired by the ancient currency Sycee — a nod to prosperity and good fortune.

Visitors enter via a snake-inspired archway (2025 is the Year of the Snake), passing under lanterns, arches of good wishes and a moon gate, before exiting via an archway adorned with a horse – a nod to 2026 being the year of the horse.

The 30th Orchid Festival runs from Saturday, February 7 to Sunday, March 8.

Top festive treats from Abel & Cole

Sustainable food and household suppliers Abel & Cole are launching a range of delicious gift hampers for the festive season.

There's a 'Showstopper' Christmas hamper, as well as vegan and vegetarian options, a Christmas Breakfast hamper and a Festive Favourites food hamper.

They are all packed with yummy, ethically sourced seasonal treats.

For full details visit: www.abelandcole.co.uk.

Above: **The Showstopper Christmas Hamper from Abel & Cole**

Are you involved in community growing projects where you live? Send in your news by emailing **editor@amateurgardening.com**

Your GREAT GARDENING FORTNIGHT

with *AG*'s **Ruth Hayes**

Ring in the changes by replacing summer bedding with cheery winter colours Inset: The cosmos is now brightening a windowsill indoors

Ring in the changes with seasonal containers

Plant winter bedding but overwinter summer plants to save money

It has been a kind autumn and the garden responded with an extended flush of summer colour.

Even the petunias kept their ends up and flowered bravely on until early November, and while the scarlet gerberas continued to flame, the lobelia kept its colourful tumbles coming and I delayed clearing the raised beds because the nasturtiums looked so darn sparky!

But now the warmer days are done and summer's container plants need to be exchanged for something more weather-resistant.

However, nothing is wasted and I've potted up healthy bedding plants and stashed them in the greenhouse to hopefully survive winter.

The plants I've chosen to replace them are violas, *Bellis perennis*, *Cyclamen coum* and a corkscrew grass - pretty standard fare but the best on offer in a garden centre completely overtaken by festive flummery.

I left a hardy helichrysom and dianthus in one pot and replaced their summer companions with winter plants.

An osteospermum and cosmos that were still flowering among them have been rehomed indoors to brighten the house.

Water after planting to settle compost around the roots

Pops of colour and quirky foliage

Although there may not be as many varieties to choose from compared with the summer, you can still make a splash by mixing bright pops of colour with foliage plants such as hardy herbs, ferns and grasses, ornamental brassicas, little red-berried *Gaultheria procumbens*, and colourful heuchera, plus dwarf spring bulbs to keep colours fresh well into next year.

Containers need a different care regime in winter. Plants won't grow much in colder weather so there's no need to feed them - everything they require is in a good quality peat-free compost.

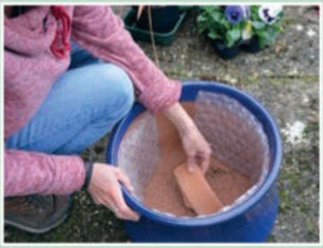
Do water them when planting and during prolonged dry spells, but always check the moisture levels of the compost by sticking in a finger in order to avoid over-watering.

Raise pots on feet so excess water can escape, and be prepared to move hanging baskets somewhere sheltered when storms are forecast.

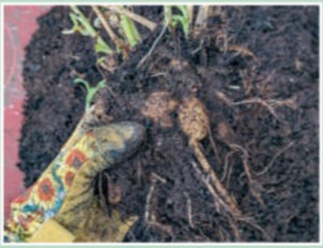
I use wheeled stands for larger pots so they can be easily moved against a sheltering wall, and I always keep bubblewrap and fleece to hand to swaddle the pots to prevent them cracking.

Helping plants and pots through winter

1 Avoid breakages caused by freezing by using containers made of frostproof terracotta, plastic, fibreglass or wood.



2 One way of insulating pots in winter is to line them with bubblewrap before adding the compost. Just make sure it doesn't cover drainage holes.



3 Check your dahlia tubers occasionally. These have formed in two years on a plant grown from seed and they'll be back outside next year too.

4 Regular deadheading will keep containers bright, and watch out for opportunistic pests that may emerge during milder spells.

All images unless otherwise credited © Ruth Hayes

I'm taking conifer cuttings from this year's healthy growth
Inset: **Rooting compound helps strong new roots to develop**

Rescuing struggling plants in containers

Use your autumn clear-out to revive and propagate plants

Sorting through your containers in autumn lets you assess what you've got and experiment with new things.

We have a small conifer in a cracked patio container. The tree is languishing and every time I've walked past it I've made a mental note to take some cuttings. Of course, the cerebral note-taking has never made it to the practical stage - until now.

I've never taken conifer cuttings before and this isn't the ideal time to do so, but I felt it was worth a try, so I'm keeping all my green fingers crossed that they will survive and develop roots on a light windowsill indoors.

And this is one of the (many) great things about gardening: there's always something new to experiment with and learn from and nothing is out of bounds. Give things a go and see what happens!

Another floral damsel in distress was a potted sedum that flowered beautifully in late summer but then started to look a little peaky.

I wanted to move it to a sunny border but discovered, when unpotting, that its malaise was caused by vine weevil grubs. So what to do?

Well, the grubs went to the bird table, I washed and re-potted the remaining roots and did the same to a couple of surviving stems that had small new growths at their bases.

They are now safely in the greenhouse and, again, I'm hoping they will pull through - I'll let you know next spring!

These sedum stems will hopefully survive re-potting

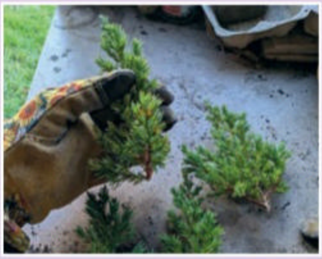
A simple stone path

Prevent grass becoming a mudbath

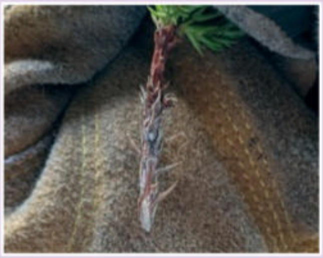
- One important job for these pre-winter days is protecting areas of lawn that get the most footfall.
- Stop them becoming a slippery mire by creating a simple path using reclaimed stones or bricks.
- I put some old stepping stones to good use by laying them over a muddy patch of grass between the shed and the compost heap, spacing them at distances that could be comfortably crossed.
- I then cut around each stone with a half-moon tool, removed the turf and soil underneath, added a layer of building sand and nestled the stones back on top.
- Once this was done, I infilled around the edge of each stone with the removed turf and the path soon bedded down to become an attractive informal walkway that saved the grass a trampling.

I set the stones in the grass and they soon bedded in attractively

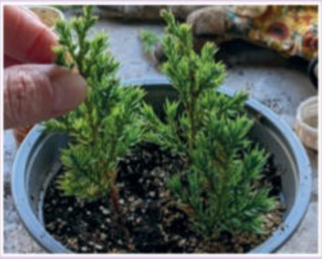
Taking semi-ripe conifer cuttings



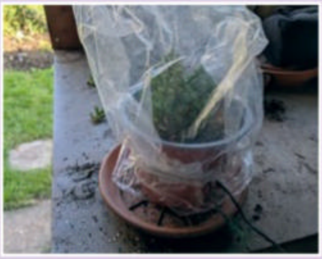
1 Cut 10cm (4in) pieces of this year's healthy growth from your plant using sharp, clean secateurs or scissors.



2 Strip away the lower foliage and make a broad angled cut at the base of the stem.



3 Dip the cut end in rooting compound and then insert into pots of damp, gritty seed compost.



4 Seal the pot in a plastic bag and set it on a light windowsill, keeping the compost damp.

The spores will have already spread far and wide, so brush a rake over lawn fungi to break them up

Easy ways of beating lawn fungi

Unsightly rather than problematic, these little growths are simple to tackle

In recent years we have had to remove two large trees from our front garden because they were dying and, if toppled by a storm, could have done some serious damage to the house.

All that's left are the subterranean roots, but these keep making their presence felt each autumn by feeding a beautiful array of small fungi.

Every year they raise their little heads as they feed on the dying root wood. They glisten in the dew and sun before turning black and fading away.

They aren't a problem, they don't damage or kill the grass, and, personally, I find them fascinating. However, I appreciate that not everyone feels the same, and the best way of removing these scattered clumps of fungi is to brush them away with the head of a rake and leave them to rot and disappear.

The tiny fungi in our lawn are feeding on decaying tree roots

Our fungi are feeding on decaying woody material buried in the soil, but the fungus *Marasmius oreades* feeds on the roots of turf and is the most common cause of 'fairy rings'.

These creamy-brown toadstools, usually seen in late summer and autumn, can cause the grass to die in the shape of a haphazard ring, sometimes with intensely lush and deep green grass growing close by.

Again, there is little point removing them and the turf and replacing them with fresh soil and grass seed as the fungal spores will have already been released and travelled far and wide.

So break up the fungi with a rake and then aerate the soil with a garden fork and feed and water it to strengthen the grass. Use an autumn-appropriate feed so the grass doesn't grow thick and lush, which makes it more vulnerable to damage by freezing temperatures.

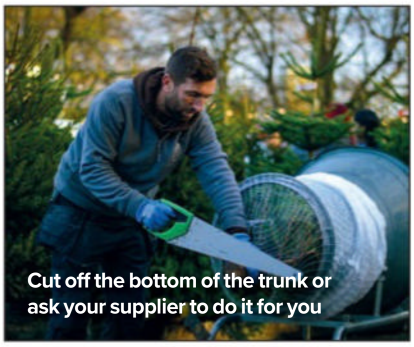
Top tips for winter tree protection

1 If you haven't already done so, attach sticky bands to fruit tree trunks to stop winter moths climbing up and laying their eggs.

2 Make sure trees are securely supported to withstand storms, especially young trees and those that are newly planted.

Oh Christmas tree

Get the most from your festive foliage



Cut off the bottom of the trunk or ask your supplier to do it for you

- Well here we are, on the cusp of Christmas, and I don't know about your households but one of the major traditions in ours is choosing and dressing the Christmas tree.
- There are myriad places in every locality selling seasonal trees, but if you want to remove the hassle and get one delivered to your door, try a company like Pines and Needles (pinesandneedles.com).
- We have used them for the past two years and their trees are top quality, beautifully shaped and will hold their needles, and your first order will come with a sturdy stand that holds your tree fast. You can even order them ready-decorated.
- When your tree arrives, cut off the bottom 5cm (2in) to remove the hard callus and allow the trunk to take up water. A cut tree will drink a lot while it's indoors, so make sure you check and top the water every few days.
- If you have a rooted tree, keep it indoors for as short a time as possible, then move it back into the garden.
- Position your tree away from radiators and fires that will cause premature needle drop.
- At the end of the festivities, don't just discard your tree - use its needles as an ericaceous mulch, create a wildlife habitat pile with the branches and chop up the trunk for kindling.

Above: Make sure the stand holds enough water and keeps the tree secure

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Now here's a houseplant with real festive spirit! The amazing multicoloured Christmas Cactus flowers across December and into the new year, with masses of bright flowers appearing in succession. It's a living decoration – cheerful, natural and full of life.

Super easy to care for and forgiving if you forget to water it, this long-lived beauty can thrive for decades. A bright room away from direct sunlight and a light misting now and then will keep it blooming every winter. The perfect, lasting Christmas gift. Grows to 45cm.

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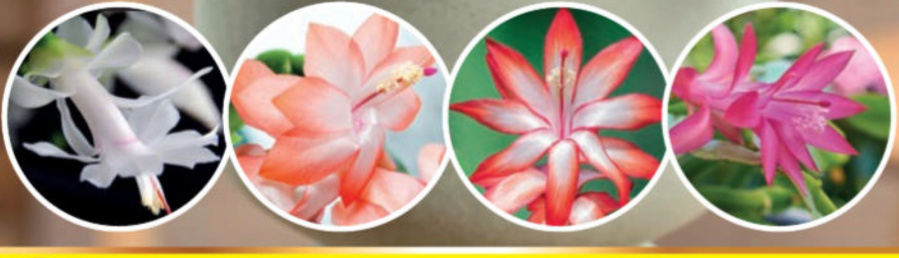

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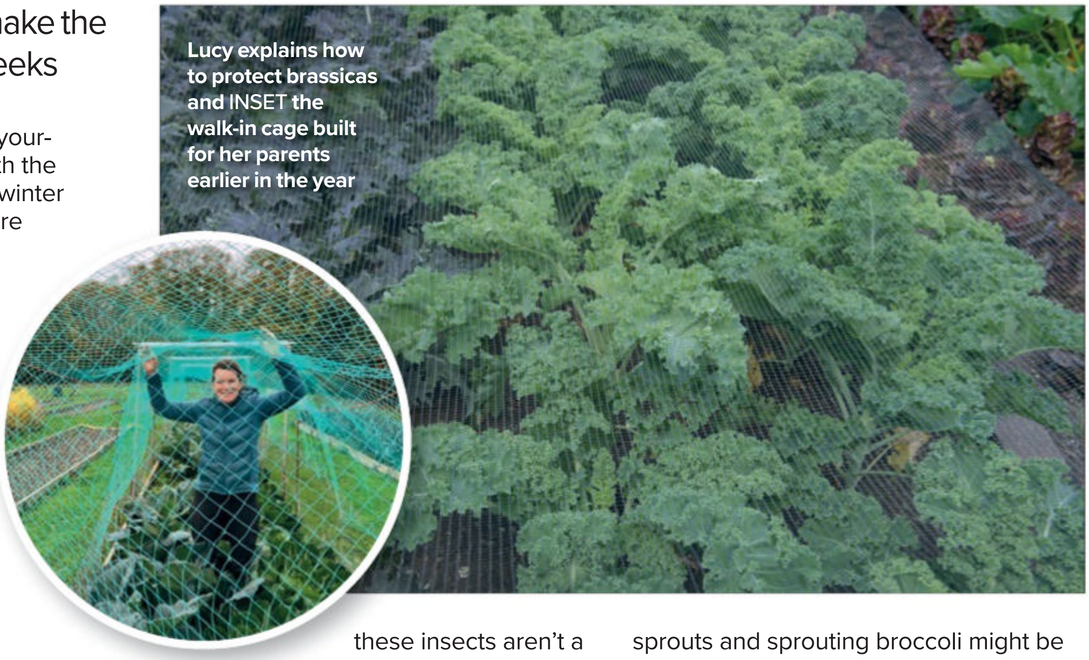
Your VEG GARDENING FORTNIGHT

with **Lucy Chamberlain**

Keeping brassicas healthy, looking after potted edibles, and growing greenhouse veg

Lucy explains how to make the most of the next few weeks



Lucy explains how to protect brassicas and INSET the walk-in cage built for her parents earlier in the year

If you're a seasoned grow-your-owner you'll be familiar with the term 'brassica' - if not, the winter vegetables I'm referring to here are cabbages, cauliflowers, kale, sprouting broccoli and Brussels sprouts.

On my parents' smallholding I helped Dad create this brassica cage earlier in the year – and I'm pleased to report that all inside is thriving. The idea with a cage is that it keeps off the main winter brassica nemesis – pigeons – because given half a chance, they'll strip these plants bare when times are lean. You'll notice this cage is a luxury 'walk-in' model – no stooping for us! If you have the materials, I can highly recommend one as opposed to breaking your back and getting wet leaves in your face when attempting a harvest (speaking from experience, as you'll have no doubt guessed).

The cages also double up as a barrier against the main summer nemesis of these edibles: cabbage white caterpillars, provided you clad the frame with 5mm butterfly mesh. Luckily, come winter, these insects aren't a problem.

So, what else can be done to maximise winter brassica health? Removing any yellowing leaves as they appear is good hygiene as it boosts air flow, otherwise fungal rots and leaf spots can fester. In milder winters, keep an eye out for mealy cabbage aphid and cabbage whitefly, and if populations look to be taking a hold, you can regularly blast them off with a strong jet of water (whitefly) or remove them between finger and thumb (aphid). Staking Brussels sprouts and sprouting broccoli might be required on exposed plots.

Harvest-wise, keep removing kale leaves as they mature (but always leave a sizeable rosette in place), cut cauliflowers and cabbages once they've developed a sufficiently large head, and pick Brussels sprout buttons from the base of the stem upwards (you can also harvest whole stems and place them in a shed, in a bucket of water, if you need to). Sprouting broccoli spears can be snapped off as florets develop, the main flush usually occurring in spring.

All images unless otherwise credited © Lucy Chamberlain

Winter care of potted edibles

✿ In a bid to expand our growing space, many of us grow hardy fruit, veg and herbs in pots, but how should we care for this edible collection during the cooler months? Of course, you can just let them be and see what happens, but with weather extremes becoming more commonplace, you might not want to risk harming them through excess rain or storms like the Beast from the East.

This is where a few simple tricks can make the difference. If your potted edibles are congested, give them bigger pots – this stops roots congregating around pot edges, where they're more vulnerable to damage by drying out or freezing. Alternatively, plant them in the ground. Waterlogging can be avoided by laying pots on their side, or standing them on pot 'feet', and roots bubbling up to the pot surface can be insulated with a top dressing of mulch or peat-free compost.

Lucy explains how to care for container-grown edibles

Step by step Key tools of fruit pruning

Having the right tools for the job is the very first step for assuring a successful fruit pruning season – not having them makes for scruffy cuts and an unsatisfactory job. So, aside from warm layers, stout gloves, dry boots, goggles (or glasses), a sturdy lightweight ladder, good waterproofs and, in my case, hair tied back, what else is there to grab? Here's what:

1 A robust, well-made pair of secateurs will last you for decades, so do treat yourself to a well-known, high-quality brand like Felco or Niwaki. These may cost more but they'll last. A hand-held sharpening tool will keep blades razor sharp, and camellia oil applied regularly to moving parts prevents them seizing up. Use secateurs for stems up to 1cm (1/2in) in thickness.

2 I wouldn't be without my loppers – I have a telescopic-handled pair of bypass loppers but other models might suit your needs better (I find the long handles so useful for cutting larger stems, where I need more leverage for my strength). Again, keep the cutting blades razor-sharp, and don't be tempted to use them on stems greater than 2.5cm (1in) across.

3 If I'm clambering up a fruit tree, I prefer to use a compact folding saw rather than anything larger and I find the models made by Silky perfect (you can't sharpen the blades but you can buy replacement ones). Pruning saws are ideal for stems 2.5cm (1in) or more in diameter. Tip: reduce the weight of the branch before making your final cut.

Grow edibles in your greenhouse

Top tip

✿ If, like me, you like to squeeze as many crops into your growing space as possible, then here's a thought: your greenhouse is one huge, beautiful cloche so why not use it this winter?

I've done exactly that, placing veg into the greenhouse borders as soon as my tomatoes and cucumbers were pulled out in late October, but there's still time now. Either see what hardy edibles have self-sown in your plot (e.g. winter purslane, lettuce, land cress, minutina) or obtain plug plants such as kale, chard and spinach online or via garden centres. Mulch and water the border as it might well be very dry and impoverished (you could fork in some feed as well), then plant your edibles. If you're up for it, you can weave soil warming cables into the soil, 6 to 8cm (2 to 3in) deep, just before planting, fixing them to a thermostat. This will allow your crops to settle in perfectly.

Right: Lucy explains how she is using her greenhouse to grow edibles this winter

Your
VEG GARDENING FORTNIGHT

with **Lucy Chamberlain**

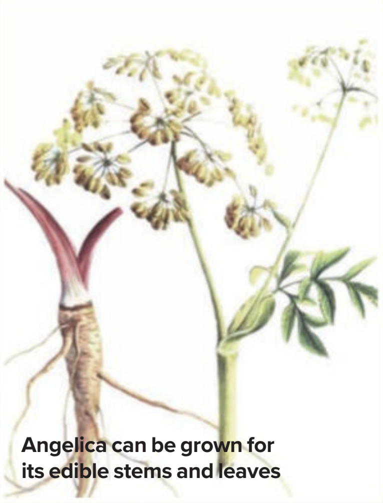
Why not try…?

Angelica

✿ I have fond memories of my grandma baking with angelica – the bottle-green sections of candied stem would glisten as she laid them on top of her famous iced buns (glace cherries alongside them, always). But little known to me at the time, there are many more uses for this plant (*Angelica archangelica*) in the kitchen.

Angelica is a highly ornamental biennial, often dotted in flower borders. The starburst flowers and seedheads hold well into the winter months, and the seeds can be steeped to make an aniseed-flavoured tea.

In its first year, the young leaves can be chopped into salads, and in the second year the flower buds can be dipped into a sweet tempura batter (boil them for five minutes first) while the peeled stems make a great gratin. Seeds are readily available, and once established, it will gently self-sow. Bear in mind that seeds remain viable for less than a year, so seek out fresh ones to avoid disappointment. Also be careful to only harvest from plants you have positioned in the garden yourself as angelica is similar in appearance to its poisonous relatives.



Angelica can be grown for its edible stems and leaves

5 quick jobs…

1 If you're planting fruit trees, be sure to stake them (unless they're trained against a wall or fence, then you don't need to). Tree stakes help get your plants off to a good start, by preventing uprooting/dislodging in squally winter weather. Good quality rubber tree ties are essential, too – please don't just twist wire around the trunks.

2 This timely reminder is said earlier and earlier each year – order your seed potatoes! If you have your heart set on specific varieties (I know I have mine for yield and flavour) place your order now. The alternative is growing whatever garden centres have left in February – but you never know, you might stumble across a real gem.

3 I love growing celeriac for its creamy soup, nutty gratins and refreshing remoulade and I find that while the 'bulbs' can be left in the ground in mild winters, harsher ones can damage eating quality. So, read your microclimate and be ready to lift, defoliate and place into boxes of damp sand in a shed or garage, should you need to.

4 Have you lifted your sweet potatoes now? If not, get them out of the soil quickly, because their storage is impeded if they get frosted. The flavour of freshly lifted tubers isn't the same as it is once they've mellowed for a few months, so if they taste a little disappointing now, just leave them in a dark, frost-free spot until next year.

5 It's been a brilliant year for apples, so much so that many of us have a surplus. If you find you're not able to get through your stored harvest, club spare fruits together with fellow gardeners and juice it (or simply juice small batches on your own). This gives you the option of freezing it, bottling it, or making cider/scrumpy.

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Small space | Big ideas

With **Nick Hamilton** of Barnsdale Gardens

Hostas such as this 'Praying Hands' are classic shade-loving plants

Above: Grasses such as *Anemanthele lessoniana* can also flourish and bring colour to gloomier corners

The best plants for a shady spot

Nick Hamilton offers inspiration for less-than-sunny spots in your garden

Shade is often an issue that worries gardeners, but the good news is that there is a wide range of plants able to cope with either semi-shade and/or full shade.

Within sun-deprived situations we also have to consider whether a plant can cope with drier conditions or whether it needs dampness at the roots, so the soil type and the plants' adaptability for growing in containers is also vital to know.

I suppose an absolute classic shade-loving plant is the hosta, and the enormous number of varieties available makes choosing what you want really difficult because you'll want them all - or is that just me? Some of my favourite smaller varieties are *H.* 'Blue Mouse Ears', with its lovely rounded, blue-green leaves topped by lavender-coloured flowers. It only grows to 30 by 15cm (12 by 6in).

If you are looking for more of a grey/blue variety, then *H.* (Tardiana Group) 'Hadspen Blue' is a very well-behaved one for a small space or a container; 'Praying Hands' is a different cultivar, and its leaves don't open out flat but look like the action its name suggests. The wavy-edged leaves are green with a very narrow cream edge, and it only gets to a size of 37cm high by 35cm wide (14.5 by 13.7in).

'Fire and Ice' is a variety that can be used to brighten any dull, shady spot with its green leaves with large, bright white centres. It's a little bit taller, getting to 75cm (30in), but it will not get wider than 50cm (20in). However, if you're looking for something similar but smaller then 'Fireworks' would be ideal as it only reaches a height and spread of 30 by 40cm (12 by 16in).

Above: *Erythronium* 'Pagoda', is a dog's-tooth violet that produces lovely sulphur-yellow flowers

Ferns and bulbs

Ferns are ideal for a shady spot, with the copper shield fern *Dryopteris erythrosora* being one of my favourites. It's a magnificent semi-evergreen fern with crisp and congested fronds that are copper-red when young, turning dark green as they age. Growing in almost any position with moist soil, it will reach 60cm by 38cm (24 by 15in) and is also great when grown in containers. Another fern that will be just as happy in a moist container or the ground is the painted lady fern *Athyrium niponicum* var. *pictum*, which has a wine-red central stalk and fronds which are grey/green in the centre, merging to green at the edges.

Spring is a great time for shady spots if you are looking to bring some flower colour to the garden as there are many bulbs and corms that will give an excellent show in even the smallest spaces. One of my absolute favourites for moist, well-drained soil is *Erythronium* 'Pagoda', a dog's-tooth violet that produces lovely sulphur-yellow flowers in the shape of a pagoda roof during April. But if you're looking for interest at a different time of year, then *Cyclamen hederifolium* would be perfect. Only reaching 12cm (5in) in height, it flowers during October and November and is great in well-drained soils and does well in pots.

■ Barnsdale Gardens in Rutland, East Midlands, has been enthralling garden fans since 1983 when Geoff Hamilton, the much-loved presenter of BBC *Gardeners' World*, bought a Victorian farmhouse with over five acres of land. Barnsdale was Geoff's 'great experiment' in peat-free and chemical-free growing, and his legacy continues today with his son Nick ensuring that the 38 gardens are kept to the stunning standard for which they are renowned. **Visit www.barnsdalegardens.co.uk**

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Top 5 whatever-the-weather vegetable garden allies

Editor **Kim Stoddart** reveals some of her favourite regenerative edible plants

As the daylight hours continue to shorten and the natural world slows sweetly into slumber, thoughts begin to turn rather excitedly to the growing season to come. It is the time for seed catalogue browsing and pondering what to grow next year as we continue to enjoy the late-season and hardy pickings from our gardens.

I've written about resilient edibles a lot over the years and, of course, it's not just the actual varieties you grow that counts, it's the way that you grow them. With the use of sustainable practices such as no-dig, mulching and nature-friendly mixed planting, it is easier to create a more biodiverse and beneficial space in which to nurture the food we grow. Saving some of your own seed will also help massively because it can become more adapted to your own vegetable patch or allotment and achieve better results.

However, some edibles reliably lend themselves incredibly well to regenerative, resilient gardening, and here are just some of my top plant picks.

Mixed planting in Kim's gardens with cheerful annuals, such as these glorious 'Teddy Bear' sunflowers, with veg to attract pollinators

1 Nasturtium

Above: **Nasturtiums work so well as ground cover around greens protecting against cabbage white caterpillars**

All images unless stated © Kim Stoddart

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Oh, the sweet peppery leaves and bright, vibrant blooms of this excellent edible cover plant simply have to be celebrated! Especially so in the gardening season just gone, where they worked so well along the front line as a sacrificial plant around brassicas, deflecting wave upon wave of cabbage white butterfly caterpillars that just kept appearing in the heat.

Nasturtiums will readily self-seed and work well to help protect the soil from drying out, which also reduces the amount of watering required for you, dear gardeners. If you have grown nasturtiums this year, they will no doubt pop up next year with no help from you whatsoever, and rather than removing them, I'd suggest welcoming their spreading ways as they provide such an invaluable (and tasty) barrier.

2 Rocket

Above: **Reliable and very tasty rocket for cut and come again pickings at a community garden**

© Luke Kemp

Another peppery edible, with such an enjoyable leaf, this plant is incredibly hardy and another great ground cover ally. It will self-seed readily as well and spread far and wide, helping to protect the soil for the plants surrounding it.

It does bolt rather quickly, but if you want to save its seed, simply cut off the pods. Generally, it will sow itself around for you, but if you want to hedge your bets, go ahead and save some seeds for later. Otherwise just remove and compost seed pods to enable the plant to conserve enough energy to grow on and on.

At the climate change community garden I run near to me in Wales, the rocket is such a valuable, low-maintenance addition to the cut-and-come-again gardens as it returns year after year with little assistance required.

Existing plants can overwinter when dormant in the ground, only to spring to leaf-life again in spring, so if you have plants growing, why not try leaving them in the ground. If they don't make it, then their stems will help provide shelter to invertebrates and feed the soil.

3 Thyme and sage

These magnificent Mediterranean herbs are so self-sufficient and drought-tolerant, they provide a really useful role in the garden. Their leaves are pungent and useful in the kitchen, and very good for you too. In the garden, they provide valuable edible ground cover and can help boost biodiversity very quickly.

I used herbs such as these at the community garden, which had very poor soil and few pollinators to begin with, and they filled the gaps and helped attract the bees and butterflies in no time at all. Rubbly loam or poor soil is ideal for them and they make an attractive ornamental and useful feature to any vegetable garden. Just help protect them from getting too wet over winter by mulching or adding stones around the plants to provide protection.

Mediterranean herbs such as thyme and rosemary are great for attracting pollinators and do well in poor soils

Above: **Comfrey is loved by pollinators and is useful for feeding the soil too**

4 Comfrey

The comfrey variety Bocking 14 will not self-seed and it is such a useful plant.

As a dynamic accumulator, its roots reach deep into the ground and it is able to access lots of beneficial minerals which are unavailable to other plants with more shallow roots. This hardy perennial will grow back year on year, providing you with lots of leaf harvests which can be used to feed your soil.

From a valuable addition to the compost pile, to comfrey tea and a chop-and-drop mulch, the uses of this very easy-to-grow plant are immense. It is also much-loved by bees so is a beneficial pollinator magnet to boot.

5 Great greens

So good for us, many plants such as kale, Swiss chard and perpetual spinach are also very low maintenance to grow and tolerant of both extreme heat and wetness.

While there are perennial varieties of kale such as 'Taunton Deane' that will reliably grow year after year, you can also grow on many green leaves for a few years by preventing them flowering too much and, instead, cutting them back to conserve energy. Purple sprouting broccoli works well in this way, especially when grown under cover.

Above: **Grow more kale, Swiss Chard and inset use beetroot leaves for added green goodness**

Idea – coriander substitute

During the winter months, it's feasible to grow small plants of coriander undercover, and it's a good time to do so as plants don't bolt as they do in the summer.

Vietnamese coriander is a hardy garden ally as it doesn't bolt and can handle drought incredibly well. My polytunnel-grown plant has been left well alone for weeks on end during periods of heat and still survived because it is a perennial. It is frost tender, but undercover it can grow on if protected from extreme cold.

Because mine has been growing in the same place for a few years now, its roots have spread far and wide so it can stand firm and dutifully return year upon year, still providing me with lovely fiery coriander leaves when the flighty seed-sown coriander had bolted while my back was turned. If you have grown a plant outside, consider potting it on and bringing it inside to enable it to carry on growing, safely protected from frost.

Above: **Consider growing Vietnamese coriander under cover to enjoy its delightful herby flavour in winter**

Kim shares pearls of wisdom from her 15 years of growing in polytunnels

FIRST TUNNELS

Undercover growing

Kim Stoddart provides some tips for undercover growing during the summer to come

It's very nice to be thinking about summer as we nudge further on into the colder months of the year.

How to cope with heat in an undercover space during the summer months is a question that often comes up on the polytunnel courses I have run, with some people seeing it almost as a barrier to considering a tunnel in the first place. Rest assured, there are lots of relatively easy-to-employ ways to build resilience and protect plants, so I'm going to share some of my tried and tested tips based on 15 years of experience in polytunnel growing.

Keep doors and windows open

During the summer, and certainly in a heatwave, doors and windows will need to be open all the time, including overnight, to help avoid the rapid build-up of heat that happens when the sun is shining. Good airflow is key.

Consider shading options

Materials such as shade netting can be used to provide protection for those plants that are most vulnerable to heat, and you can also improvise with what you have to hand. Even some cardboard could be positioned up high to create shade for plants below, and layered mixed planting also helps afford protection for plants and produce.

Think soil health

As with any organic gardening system, the health of your soil will help plants thrive, so start by protecting the ground from drying out in the sun. Ground cover is the name of the game and regenerative approaches such as no-dig will help provide greater resilience down below. Try to avoid having bare batches of soil between plants; leaves can act as valuable sun umbrellas and mulching around any especially water-hungry plants will help a great deal.

Above: If you are worried about plant nibblers getting into your tunnel overnight when the doors and windows are open, you can use netting or barriers, such as gravel around your tunnel, to help

Ground cover plants make the best use of space undercover and also reduce the amount of watering required

Water-wise thinking

The more obvious rules of watering early in the morning or later at night always apply, but what is really important is to water deeply so the liquid refreshment can permeate further down into the ground and then stay there for longer. This, combined with mulching and/or ground cover plus sufficient shade and good airflow, will help immensely.

Always make sure you water the ground. Overhead sprinkler systems aren't ideal to use during a heatwave as they will waste water and could encourage blight on potatoes and tomatoes.

Other resilient tips

If you are gardening in the soil in your tunnel, know that plants that aren't fed lots of fertiliser, and which instead thrive on nutrients from the soil, tend to develop deeper root structures that access food and water from further afield and this better enables them to stand firm.

Plants in pots in a polytunnel benefit from being moved outside during the summer months, if you can, as this saves you time and effort with watering.

Above: Regenerative gardening practices will help protect the soil from drying out and afford plants greater protection

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Cyclamen in bright pots can really cheer up the home when the days get shorter and the lights are lit earlier

9 bright ideas for winter colour and joy

Garden designer, TV presenter and author **Manoj Maldé** shares top tips to help bring enjoyment to the garden over the months ahead with *AG*'s Sue Bradley

All images unless otherwise credited: Shutterstock

Many of us find winter a tough time, and garden designer and TV presenter Manoj Maldé is no exception.

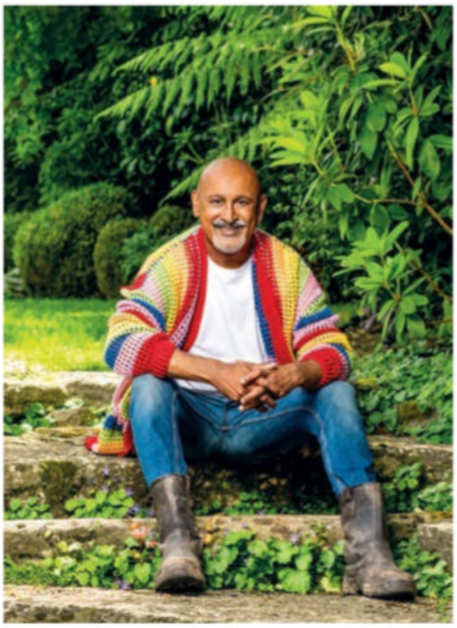
For a man of Asian heritage born in the warm climes of Kenya, the prospect of plummeting temperatures and grey, dismal days do not fill him with joy.

Nevertheless, he's got a few tricks up his flamboyant sleeves for making gardens more enticing and enjoyable over the winter months and he's keen to share them in the hope they will encourage more of us to reap the benefits of venturing outside at this time of the year.

Those who have followed Manoj's career over the years will know that colour has always been a big part of his life and work, whether he's been working in fashion or garden design.

From his striking debut 'Beneath a Mexican Sky' garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 2017, with its bright backdrop of orange and pink walls, to his historic RHS and Eastern Eye Garden of Unity in 2023, his 'Tackle HIV Challenging Stigma' garden in 2025, and not forgetting his makeover ideas on BBC2's *Your Garden Made Perfect*, he's a man who's not afraid to make the most of striking hues.

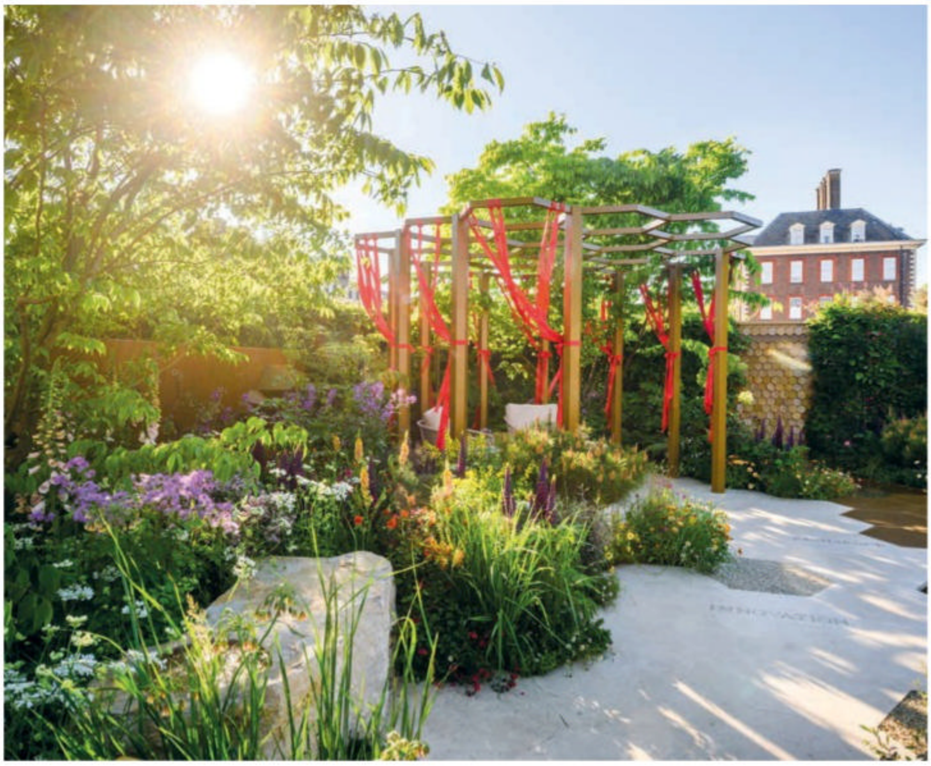
"I remember being asked once where my love of colour came from and at the time I couldn't put my finger on it; the lightbulb moment came when I opened my mum's wardrobe one day and all of her beautiful coloured saris were hanging there," he recalls. "It's part of my heritage, and as a child I was surrounded by colour, with the wonderfully colourful tribes and flora and fauna of Kenya. It's in my DNA.



© Paul Madeley

Manoj is renowned for the bold use of colour in his garden designs

Manoj's 'Tackle HIV Challenging Stigma' RHS Chelsea Flower Show garden in 2025



© Joanna Kossak

The clever use of colours, textures and shapes adds depth to Manoj's garden designs

© Joanna Kossak

"Put simply, I love using colour. It's something that makes a garden joyful, and with everything that the world is going through at the moment, people need joy. As garden designers we have the ability to lift people up.

"Colour doesn't just come from the plants we grow but from boundaries, such as fences, and soft furnishings, all things that remain in place throughout the year."

Another of Manoj's design tips involves making the most of form, especially when it comes to geometric shapes like the hexagons he used in his latest Chelsea offering. Doing this in the garden can be as simple as clipping an evergreen into a sphere, spiral or pyramid.

© Mikal Ludlow

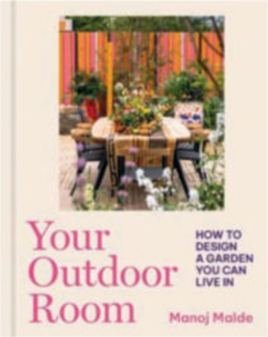
Above: Manoj speaking at the Malvern Autumn Show

Manoj has many ways of lifting the garden in winter, providing something to look out at when flowers are few and far between.

"I'm not that much of a fan of winter, but I love moments like seeing the silhouettes of trees in the fog, sparkling frost on shrubs and pots of colourful bedding on doorsteps," he says.

© Jonathan Buckley

Above: Manoj's striking 'Beneath a Mexican Sky' garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 2017



For more advice from Manoj, take a look at his book *Your Garden Room: How to Design a Garden You Can Live In*, published by Frances Lincoln.

*** Manoj was speaking to Sue Bradley during the Malvern Autumn Show. Don't miss the RHS Malvern Spring Festival from May 7 to 10. *rhsmalvern.co.uk***

Manoj's 9 ways to brighten the garden in winter

Colour your life

Above: **Bring in colour and creativity when you can; from painted furniture and walls to creatively decorated oil drums**

Whether it's painted panels and posts, vibrant seating or glazed pots, injecting colour into the garden is easy to do and makes a big difference in winter.

I painted up the pergola in the RHS and Eastern Eye Garden of Unity at RHS Chelsea in 2023 and it made a huge impact. Use a colour that really resonates with you.

There's some lovely furniture in gorgeous shades around: some can be left outside all winter and other pieces can be brought out when the weather is fair.

Even simple additions such as a painted oil drum can really lift a space. Make it one bright colour or create patterns.

Turn a section of a wall into a focal point using interesting, colourful tiles.

Timber posts, set slightly apart, create a statement and can be painted any colour you like. They can be used as a screen, to divide one space from another and create a sense of intrigue.

An alternative way of separating off different parts of the garden is to install a filigree screen, or some kind of decorative garden panel.

Evergreen shrubs

Greenery in the garden is important throughout the year. Even during winter it's important to be able to look out and see something that's alive, and evergreen shrubs are fantastic for this, especially when they get that solid touch of frost on top and are glistening in the low light, looking absolutely stunning.

Many evergreens respond well to being clipped, which means it's possible to make them into bold shapes for further interest. Try evergreen honeysuckle (*Lonicera nitida*), which grows quickly, and for drier soils, consider yew (*Taxus baccata*). Camellias are a great choice for acid conditions and bring the added benefit of colourful flowers later on in spring.

Above: **Evergreens like this European yew look fantastic with a touch of frost in the winter light**

Above: **Fragrant *Daphne odora* 'Aureomarginata' looks and smells stunning in winter**

Grow fragrant plants by the front door

Richly perfumed plants positioned close to a front or back door are a joy for visitors and a good reason to venture out from time to time.

Great choices include Christmas box (*Sarcocca confusa*) and gold-edged winter daphne (*Daphne odora* 'Aureomarginata').

Growing them in pots means they can be relocated elsewhere in the garden in spring, when flowering bulbs and the like are ready to provide a colourful welcome.

Above: **Multi-stemmed trees add intriguing silhouettes to the garden and pale-barked varieties like the West Himalayan birth add a ghostly air**

Grow a multi-stemmed tree

Trees add fabulous silhouettes to a garden, especially in winter when their leafless branches really stand out. Consider multi-stemmed varieties such as West Himalayan birch (*Betula utilis* subsp. *jacquemontii*), which has a beautiful branch structure and brilliant white bark. Others with interesting trunks include the Tibetan cherry (*Prunus serrula*, also sold as *P. tibetica*) with coppery-toned bark that looks like wound copper wires, and paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*) with attractive peeling bark.

Keep the grasses

Ornamental grasses look great for much of the year, especially in winter when hoar frosts make their seedheads glisten. Keep them going as long as they remain upright to provide structure and movement, only chopping them back when they're a mushy mess.

Good choices include feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis* x *acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'), which is tall and upright, and *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Silberfeder', with arching foliage and feathery flowerheads. Grasses don't have to be tall, however: Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra*) is wonderful. It grows into a spherical shape and looks beautiful in winter.

Above: **Grasses such as *Hakonechloa macra* can look beautiful in winter**

Above: **Colourful stems such as *Cornus sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire' bring warmth and cheer**

Seek out colourful plants

Plants with colourful stems, such as various forms of dogwood, look great in winter. I love *Cornus sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire', a deciduous shrub with orange-red stems that look as if they're ablaze. These can be grown in the ground or in a pot. Prune everything back in spring to maintain the colour.

Above: **Work with subtle lighting in the garden**

Shine a light

Good lighting is really important in winter, when days are short and nights are dark, and it can be used to make the most of the garden too. I recommend avoiding uplighting, which can adversely affect the wildlife. Keep lighting subtle: there's nothing worse than garish lighting in the garden; you don't want it to look like the Blackpool Illuminations. LED lanterns can look very effective.

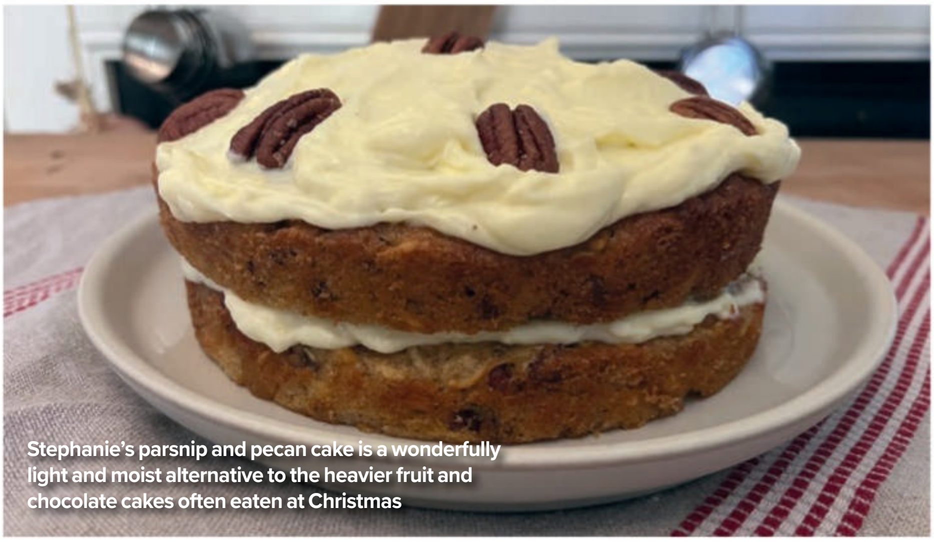
Plant bulbs

The first signs of spring are such powerful signals that winter won't last forever, so plant plenty of bulbs to add splashes of colour to the garden as early as possible. Winter aconites come up in late winter, bringing a dash of yellow, and early flowering narcissus are a lovely addition too. People are so hungry for spring to get going and there's such a feeling of joy that warmer weather is on its way.

Above: **Planting bulbs brings the hope and promise of the colourful spring to come**

THE YEAR-ROUND KITCHEN GARDEN

With **Stephanie Hafferty**



Stephanie's parsnip and pecan cake is a wonderfully light and moist alternative to the heavier fruit and chocolate cakes often eaten at Christmas

A deliciously light parsnip and pecan cake recipe

Stephanie Hafferty shares her secrets for a sweet alternative to carrot cake

A parsnip cake? It is surprising how using this seasonal ingredient in a sweet dish raises so many eyebrows, yet adding its root vegetable cousin, the carrot, to a cake doesn't cause a murmur.

Just like carrots, parsnips add sweetness and moisture to the cake and help to keep it moist for days. I find that no one ever guesses the 'secret' ingredient: they just want another slice!

The ginger and lemon really shine, cutting through the richness of the buttery cream cheese frosting.

Above: People tend to be surprised when parsnips are used in baking, but they help to give the cake its sweetness and keep it moist for longer

Cake ingredients

- 300g (10.5oz) grated parsnips (weight after peeling and grating)
- 3 large eggs, beaten
- 250ml (9 fl oz) sunflower oil (or another light oil)
- 100g (3.5oz) stem ginger, chopped
- 90g (3oz) pecans, chopped
- 250g (9oz) self-raising flour
- 175g (6oz) soft light brown sugar
- 3 lemons, grated zest of

Frosting

- 2 tbsp lemon juice
- 250g (9oz) full fat cream cheese
- 125g (4oz) icing sugar
- 125g (4oz) butter, at room temperature
- a few pecans to decorate

Method

- Preheat the oven to 190°C/170°fan/gas mark 5.
- Grease two 20cm (8in) round sandwich tins and line with greaseproof paper.
- Place the grated parsnip, chopped pecans, stem ginger and lemon zest in a large bowl. Stir to combine.
- Beat the eggs and oil together, then pour into the parsnips mixture and mix together.
- Add the sugar and flour and mix well, until all of the flour is incorporated.
- Spoon into the prepared tins, evenly spreading so the mixture is level.
- Place in the centre of the oven and bake for around 30 minutes, until the cake is golden and a skewer inserted into the middle comes out clean.
- Turn out onto a wire cooling rack and leave to completely cool.
- Make the frosting by beating the butter until smooth. Next add the lemon juice and cream cheese, and beat together until completely combined. Sift in the icing sugar and mix together. The frosting should be fluffy and light.
- Place one of the cool cakes onto a plate and spread half the frosting over the top, smoothing it out so it is level.
- Place the other cake on top and spread the rest of the frosting evenly over it.
- Alternatively, spread a third of the frosting inside, a third over the top and the remaining third around the sides of the whole cake.
- Decorate with pecans. Keep chilled until you're ready to serve.
- The cake will keep for several days in the fridge or other cool place. Bring to room temperature before serving.

Above: You can replace the pecans with walnuts, hazels or mixed nuts if you prefer

Variations

- Replace the parsnips with carrots.
- Replace the lemon juice and zest with the zest of two medium oranges plus 2 tbsp of orange juice.

© Shutterstock

Above: The zesty lemon really cuts through the richness of the butter cream

For more recipe, gardening and course information from Stephanie see **www.nodighome.com**

All images unless otherwise credited: Stephanie Hafferty

THE NATURAL FORAGER'S GARDEN

With expert broadcaster, author and long-standing *AG* columnist, **Anne Swithinbank**

Getting a taste for chicory, and growing rosemary and sweet wild strawberries

Anne offers some delicious edible inspiration for the fortnight ahead

Anne's 'Foxtail' rosemary will keep her supplied with flavoursome leaves over winter

In this reflective season, I'm mulling over my tiresome attitude to bitter salad leaves. How many times have I bought a rosette of frilly-leaved escarole or endive, before regretfully chewing a few leaves and leaving the rest to rot in the fridge?

Now and again I'll sow a row or two of red chicory, enjoy their beautiful colours and make one small salad with walnuts and blue cheese before composting the rest. Even the blanched, pale and therefore only slightly bitter *chicons* (heads) of 'Witloof' chicory are never finished off completely. I'm not alone, as the rest of my tribe don't seem to care much for them either, despite liking peppery rocket and mizuna.

French and Italian families seem to thrive on these bitter salads, so is this cultural, or do I need to work harder with combinations and dressings? I want them to be a delicious autumn treat, served with pears or cooked into bakes with interesting sauces. This is the time of year for forcing chicories and as we haven't grown the Witloof type, I'll have a go with common *Cichorium intybus*.

Some plants generate more questions than others at events and a regular is the shrubby Mediterranean culinary herb, rosemary. Like bay, it stays reliably fresh during winter and the stems are useful as cut material for vases as well as flavouring trays of roast veg. Gardeners ask how and when to prune, why chunks or whole shrubs die off and why cuttings are often difficult to root. I'm grubbing out an old plant now but won't be planting replacements until spring.

When our oldest grandson was at the crawling and toddling stage, he quickly learned to forage, starting with what was literally under his nose - wild strawberries. We kept an eye on him and yes, I continuously checked to make sure there were no poisonous berries he could move on to. I'm a great fan of the wild strawberry, for their tiny but sweet and aromatic fruits. However, they do spread by runners and can make a nuisance of themselves in a tidily maintained garden.

How to force... chicory

Common chicory (*Cichorium intybus*) is a favourite semi-wilding plant for its cornflower-blue flowers and because flocks of greenfinches are attracted to its seeds. A perennial, it grows like a dandelion, forming a mop-like rosette of jagged leaves above long tap roots before rising up to bloom.

Witloof chicory (*C. intybus* var *foliosum*) looks similar until forced, when pale, crunchy chicons are produced. My reprint of *The Vegetable Garden* by Vilmorin-Andrieux, first published in 1885, assures me that even common chicory forced in darkness will lose most of its bitter taste and become known as *barbe de capucin*, or Capuchin's beard.

Veering off into etymology, the word *capuchin* derives from Franciscan Capuchin friars, who wore brown robes with large pointed hoods known as *cappuccio* (The Latin *cappa* meaning head covering). They also had long white beards, and this mixture of brown and white gave capuchin monkeys their name and also cappuccino coffees.

Keen to get my hands on some capuchin's beard, I decided to lift and trim chicory roots ready for forcing. Back in 1885 they made a kind of clamp in a dark cellar by placing the roots in a sloping mound of well-drained soil or sand, so their trimmed tops faced outwards. With careful watering and in temperatures described as neither warm nor cold, apparently the forced leaves grew as much as 20 to 25cm (8 to 10in) long within three weeks!

In the absence of a cellar, I'm opting to force my roots in pots, as for Witloof chicory. Any remaining leaves are trimmed 1cm (half an inch) above the roots, which can also be shortened to fit the pot. Planted upright in sand or used compost with the tops just proud, they're watered in sparingly, covered to exclude light and placed in a temperature of 7 to 13°C (45 to 55°F).

Anne isn't especially fond of chicory such as Witloof chicory (*C. intybus* var *foliosum*) but she's going to try forcing some. Inset: **Wild chicory is grown for its beautiful blue flowers**

All images unless otherwise credited: John Swithinbank

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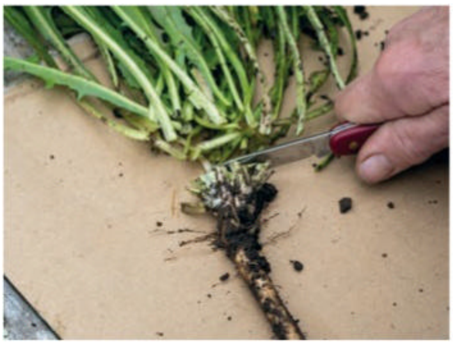
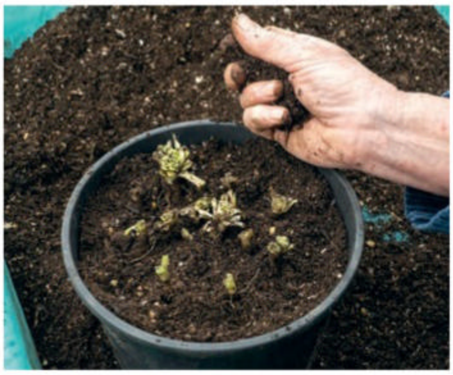
Step by step How to force chicory

1 Self-seeded chicory grows well for Anne among the winter ground cover of the kitchen garden. She lifted a few young plants and one older one.

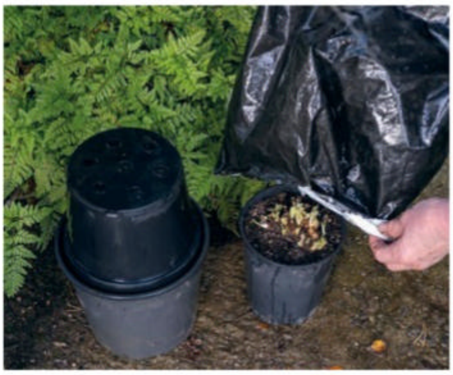


2 Start by trimming the lifted plants, using a sharp, clean knife to remove the tops to around 1cm (half an inch) above the sturdy roots.

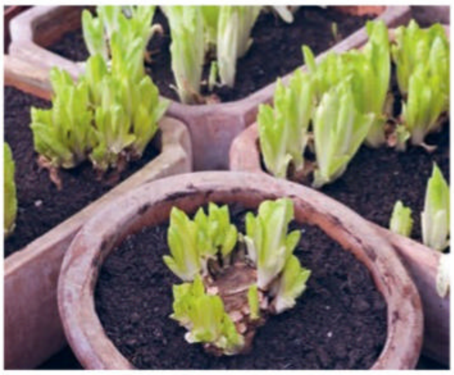
3 Soon, there was a neat pile of roots with tops trimmed and the roots shortened at the base to fit inside their pot.



4 Using gritty, just-moist old compost, the roots were potted vertically (a fiddly job) with tops sitting just proud of the surface of the compost.



5 After a light watering in, the tops were covered to exclude light. Anne used two pots (one to cover the holes in the other) and an old compost bag.



6 Forcing 'Witloof' chicory for 'chicons' is more usual but Anne can't wait to sample the taste and texture of Capuchin's beard.

Wild strawberries; a blessing or a menace?

Once you have tasted the sweet, aromatic flavour of a wild or alpine strawberry, ordinary cultivars will never be the same. From a sowing made many moons ago, or perhaps a tiny runner hitching a lift on the roots of some gifted plants, we now have a healthy population of *Fragaria vesca* in several parts of the garden.

This British wildflower also threads its way through the hedge banks hereabouts, where white spring blooms are easy to spot, followed by tasty fruits soon eaten by birds and small rodents. I think they make an attractive and edible groundcover but if you find them messy or fiddly to pick, try perpetual-fruiting 'Mara des Bois' and Mariguette® ('Marionnet 99'), or June-fruiting 'Gariguette' for wild strawberry flavour on normal-sized plants.

Above: **Alpine strawberries are very resilient but can spread quickly. For wild strawberry flavour from larger berries on normal-sized plants, try Mariguette® ('Marionnet 99')**

Anne's 'Majorca Pink' rosemary had been slowly dying on one side so she grubbed the plant out with a spade

Rosemary post mortem

Our elderly rosemary 'Majorca Pink' has been teetering on the verge of death for the past three years, but luckily I rooted some cuttings before last summer's drought took its toll. Saying goodbye to an old friend should be sad, but the bed looks better without it.

Rosemary thrives in poor, well-drained soil with lots of sunshine, so its tendency to be short-lived on heavier soils in wet winters is hardly a mystery. They almost grow too well here and soft, lush stems are ill-equipped to cope with cold, soggy winters. Planting them on the flat can be a mistake; luckily, we have an established 'Foxtail' rosemary romping and tumbling out of a raised bed.

You can prune a rosemary, but not during winter, and cutting into old wood is usually disastrous. Try to maintain a healthy stem network by pruning back some younger stems during spring or early summer, after a flowering period and when plants are in active growth. Summer cuttings are best peeled away with a 'heel' of older wood attached. Keep them fairly short at 8 to 10cm (3 to 4in) long and strike several into one 9cm (3.5in) pot of 50:50 multipurpose compost and grit. I cover mine with ventilated polythene, or similar, and keep them out of full sun until rooted.

Above: **Summer is the optimum time for taking rosemary cuttings with a 'heel' of old stem attached. Keep them out of direct sunshine until they have rooted well**

Try these... Put a rosemary on your spring planting list

***Salvia rosmarinus* 'Foxtail'**
My 'Foxtail' is Medusa-like, with arching stems trailing downwards but also upwards. Great for a raised bed, this is a strong-grower and bears lovely blue flowers. It holds the Award of Garden Merit.
www.norfolkherbs.co.uk

***Salvia rosmarinus* 'Majorca Pink'**
An upright rosemary with pretty pink flowers showing a stripe on the lower lip. Of moderate size, plants reach just over 1m (3ft).
www.jekkas.com

***Salvia rosmarinus* 'Miss Jessopp's Upright'**
Reaching 2m (6ft) tall, this upright bushy rosemary is perfect for a rosemary hedge. There's a lovely show of purple-blue flowers from early spring. AGM holder.
www.rhsplants.co.uk

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Cleaning and oiling your tools and storing them neatly is one of Mike's top tips when it comes to winding down the garden as the year draws to its end

4 ways to get your garden ready for next year

Mike Palmer explains how to prune, plan, polish and prepare for 2026

> *"The great thing about a garden is that it teaches patience and planning – one season's sowing brings another season's delight"*
> *Gertrude Jekyll*

All images unless otherwise credited: Mike Palmer

She certainly knew a thing or two about gardening, that Gertrude Jekyll. Not only did she have a keen eye for colour and design, but she clearly understood the benefits to all gardeners of planning and patience.

And now, unbelievably, as we ready to close the curtains on another year, it's time to get our boots in the starting blocks to get us garden-ready for 2026. Oh no, there'll be no sitting around in a cosy armchair in front of a crackling Christmas fire on my watch, my lovely gardening friends. There's work to be done!

They say that failing to plan is planning to fail, and never have truer words been said. So let me share my top tips for preparing for a bountiful, beautiful and blooming marvellous 2026.

Mike's regime for preparing the garden for winter includes insulating tender plants and making sure his outdoor furniture is protected against the weather

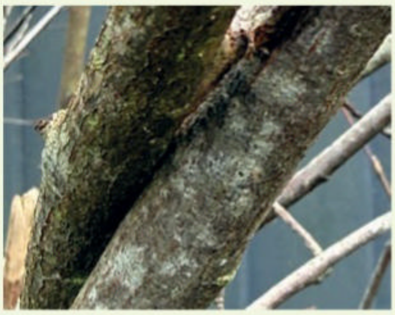
Above: **Get your secateurs ready, as many plants can be pruned back now**

Prune appropriately

So many of us shake in our boots at the mention of the 'P' word – pruning! But there's really no need. While learning to garden, and even with my pruning L plates on, I never killed a plant, and right now is a good time to cut back certain deciduous trees and shrubs.

Most fruit trees, acers, roses and others will benefit from having dead, diseased and dying wood pruned from the plant, but leave spring-flowering forsythia and hydrangeas, and plums, gages and cherries alone now. Look out for crossing branches that rub together, leaving open wounds which are susceptible to infection or attack. Pruning at this time of the year also helps maintain shape and size.

The winter months, when deciduous trees are dormant, is a great time to assess the health of plants and trees. A professional tree surgeon or arboriculturist will be able to assess work that might be beneficial and assist with planning, if required.



Above: **Remove crossing branches because the way they rub together damages the bark and provides an entry point for pests and disease**

Clean the greenhouse, maintain your tools

Above: **Clean greenhouse windows and sweep away cobwebs to let maximum light in to overwintering plants**

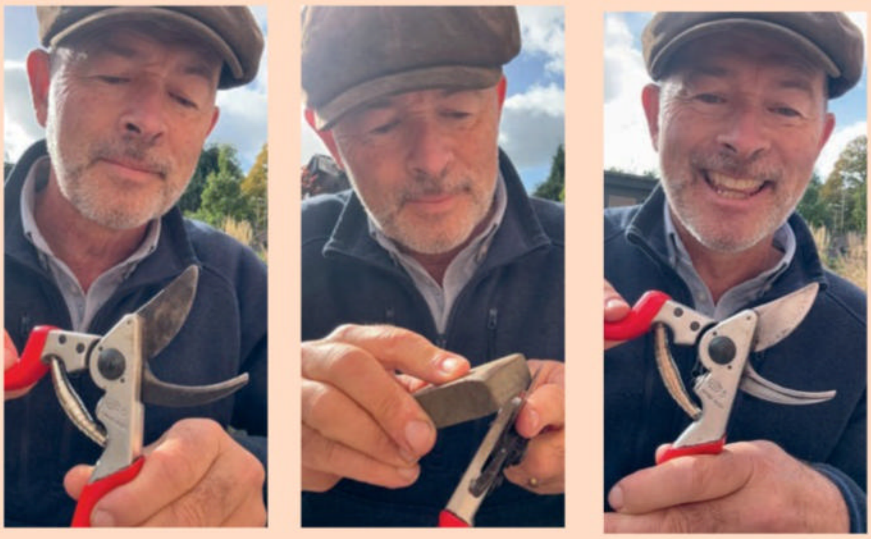
I love a good spring clean, but for us gardeners spring is a tad too late, so here's my list of things to be 'polished':

It's incredible how quickly secateurs, snips, shears and loppers succumb to sap and other plant residues as we cut and prune our way around the garden, dulling their appearance and bite. Once winter pruning has been completed, and in between each pruning session, clean dirty blades with a stiff brush or an old toothbrush and a drop of white vinegar, or a dedicated garden tool cleaner or cleaning block. All will work wonders in lifting grime and restoring a respectable shine.

Once the sappy residue has been removed, a few carefully angled strokes with a tool sharpener against the cutting edge will restore their keenness – just watch your digits. Once shiny and sharpened, lubricate the blades with a thin application of tool oil. Sorted!

I re-use seed trays and pots as often as I can to get my money's worth – who shouted 'Scrooge'? Joking aside, reusing trays and pots ticks the sustainability box perfectly. Sit outside in a warm coat on a cold, sunny winter's day with a washing up bowl full of soapy water, singing "I'm gonna wash that dirt right outta my pots" - the singing part is optional! Rinse under a garden tap and leave to air dry before storing away.

Sheds, potting sheds, and greenhouses are frequented by spiders, and other most welcome insects. Cobwebbing is something that I endeavour to keep on top of, but I always have a final tidy up and a gentle sweep through in winter.



Above: **Cleaning, sharpening and oiling cutting tools keeps them sharp and keen and also means they will last a lot longer**

Tidy away those bits and bobs

Above: **Mike makes time for a meeting with his shed manager as he tidies up and stores things neatly**

If you're anything like me, and I bet you are, then you'll know that in the heat of the season, things get picked up and left on work or potting benches, or greenhouse staging, resulting in a random collection of pots, seed packets, gardening tools, scissors, twine and half-empty bags of compost. My other half incorrectly describes this as a blooming mess – he's wrong, of course, I know where everything is (sort of). I use the winter months to get sorted and tidied, putting things away where they should be and getting organised.

Why have one watering can when you can have six? It's now that I check watering cans for leaks, discarding any that have gone past their best, and storing the rest away around the side of the house by the water butt.

I can't tell you how many packets of seeds I opened this year: now is the time to go through seed packets, putting aside those that have gone past their sell by date and organising them in my seed box, to be opened again in March. How exciting!

Above: **Cleaning modules and pots saves money and reduces the amount of new plastic we need to use**

Plan ahead for the coming year

Above: **Sort through and organise your seeds so you're all set to sow and they are ready to fill your garden with colour next year**

Naturally, I've left the best part till last... planning. Once the hard work of pruning, polishing, and putting away has been completed, treat yourself to a Christmas cuppa or a tipple and cosy up in front of a roaring fire or warm radiator, with pen and paper, or laptop, to do the following:

- Decide which seeds you are going to sow, and even put them in sowing date order – there's organised for you!
- Thumb through your favourite gardening magazine (which you already are!), gardening books, or catalogues and plan exciting colour and plant combinations for stunning summer containers.
- Plan, or perhaps re-plan, a new border. I'm re-jigging my tropical border as some plants got lost at the back and need to be pulled forward, so this will focus my attention.
- Think about introducing more plants that will encourage pollinators and wildlife into your garden.
- Look at wasted planting opportunities, especially when it comes to vertical spaces including trees, fences, pergolas, posts and porches, all of which make great hosts for climbing plants like roses and clematis.
- Aim to get colour in your garden for 365 days next year. It's easy to do, with a succession of bulbs, annuals, perennials, shrubs and trees.
- Try and water your garden less next year by introducing plants that are more drought-tolerant. Plants with silver foliage like lavenders and artemisias and other Mediterranean species are great choices, once they're established!
- Finally, as the days grow ever shorter and become colder and damper, it's important that you, the custodian of your garden, make the most of the opportunity to wind down, rest and recuperate, ready to get going with gusto in 2026!

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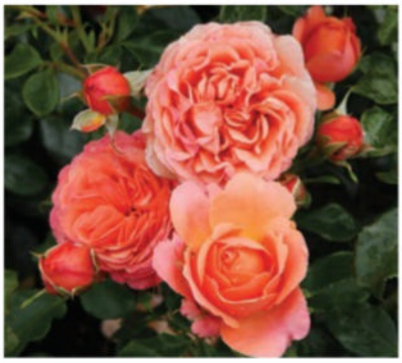

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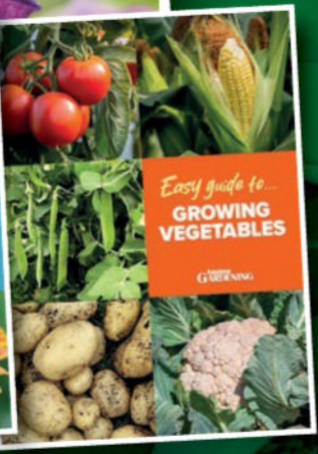
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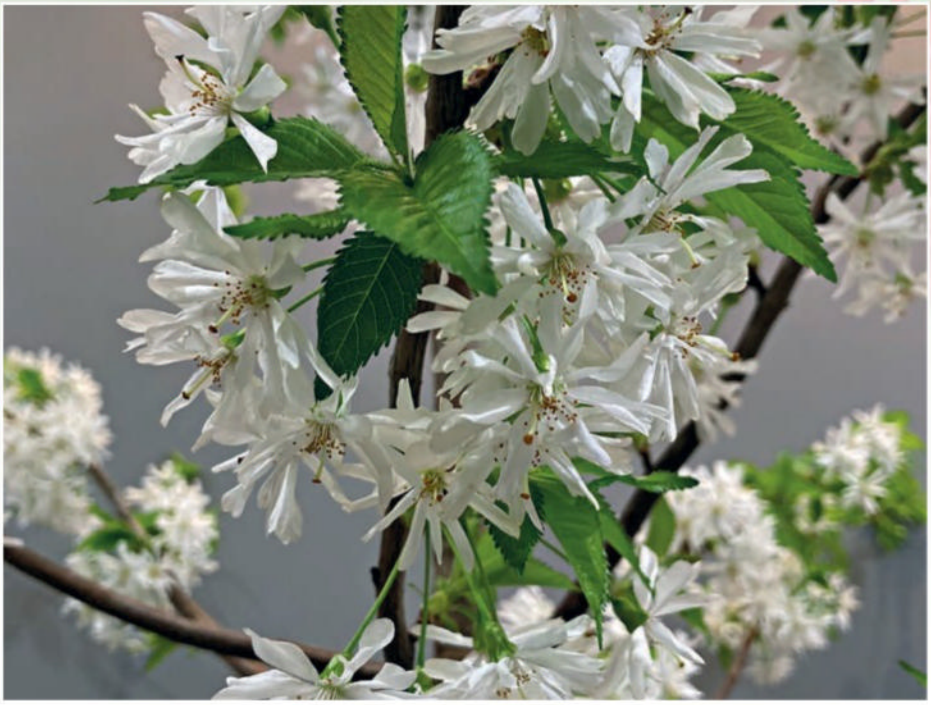
11 garden stars with a heavenly theme

Liz Zorab chooses her favourite plants inspired by the skies

Being a gardener, I spend much of my time looking downwards towards foliage, flowers and soil. I also raise my eyes to look at larger shrubs and trees, but spend considerably less time looking up at the sky, and for good reason, as plants are rooted in the ground. Yet as an organic gardener, guided by permaculture principles, I like to look at the whole picture, the entire setting within which the garden sits, which includes the surrounding gardens, the landscape, and yes, the sky.

Inspired by a comet called Comet C/2025 A6 (Lemmon), travelling across the night sky last month, I thought it would be fun to explore some of the plants that are named after celestial bodies. Once I started looking, I found a great many plants I could include in this list, so I have chosen the ones that I'm familiar with and grow in our garden, plus a couple that are on my latest lovely wish list.

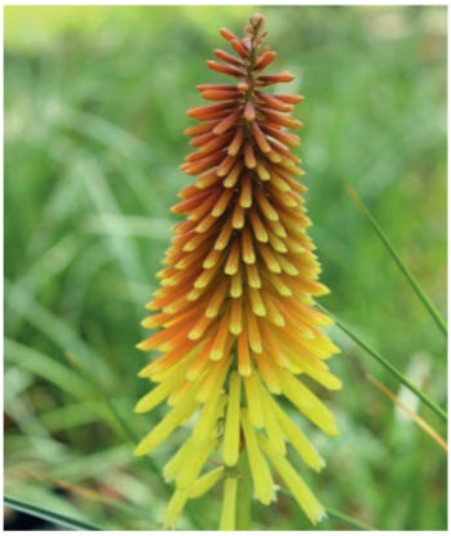


Above: I first saw this ornamental cherry tree *Prunus* 'Starlight' at RHS Chelsea Flower Show

Prunus 'Starlight'

Winner of RHS Plant of the Year 2024, I saw this in full bloom at RHS Chelsea Flower Show and liked it so much that I ordered one for the garden. It is unfussy about soil type as long as it is not in constantly waterlogged soil. Grow in full sun for the best flower display and colour in autumn.

This deciduous, ornamental cherry tree produces scented flowers in mid or late March to early April. The flowers are unusual in that they look more like those of a *Magnolia stellata* than the usual cherry flower. Grows to 400cm (13.1ft) height and 300cm (10ft) spread in around 10 years.



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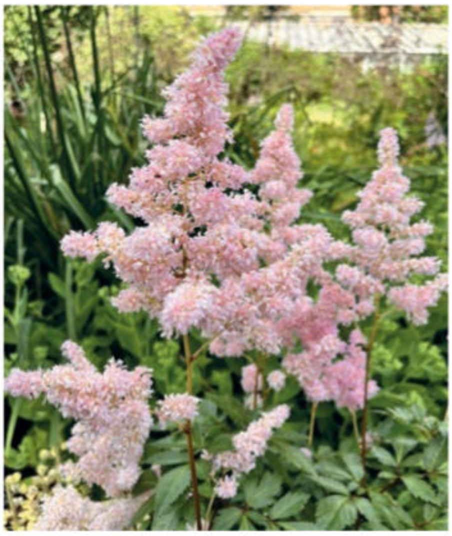
Above: This show-stopping variety of red hot poker, *Kniphofia* 'Bressingham Comet' is hardy in most of the UK and Ireland



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Above: Pretty pale pink flowers of *Astilbe* 'Europa' (_japonica_hybrid)

Kniphofia 'Bressingham Comet'

This variety of red hot poker grows to 60cm (2ft) in height and has flowers with apricot and yellow petals and red tops from summer to autumn.

Grow in loam and sandy soil, in full sun or partial shade. West and south-facing sites are ideal. They are hardy in most of the UK and Ireland, but may struggle in colder winters. I grew one in a large pot for several years and it thrived.

Astilbe 'Europa' (japonica hybrid)

This early flowering herbaceous perennial is ideal for a damp area of the garden. It grows to 50cm (19.6in) in height and produces the palest pink flowers. Grow in partial shade in a sheltered position and avoid growing on a south-facing site. It likes loam and clay soils that retain moisture.

This plant is on my wish list and as soon as I have some sheltered areas in the garden, I will be planting astilbes. And, if you are wondering what the connection is to celestial bodies, Europa is the fourth largest of Jupiter's moons.

All images unless otherwise credited: Liz Zorab

Great for a shady area of your garden during summer or indoors during winter as a houseplant, *Begonia* 'Stellar Storm'

Much-admired in Liz's garden, the pincushion blooms of *Knautia macedonica* 'Mars Midget'

Begonia 'Stellar Storm'

Here's an interesting plant for a shady spot outside during the summer to grow as a bedding plant, and to bring indoors for the remainder of the year. *Begonia* 'Stellar Storm' has striking spiral-shaped, spiky-edged leaves with burgundy-purple, red and silver markings. Indoors, it is not a plant to hog the windowsill space as it prefers a spot that is indirectly lit.

This plant reaches a height of 30cm (12in) and spread of 35cm (13.7in). It is tender and will not survive freezing temperatures, so bring it inside before the first frosts and do not plant out until all risk of frost has passed.

Coreopsis grandiflora Solar Moon ('Mvnc1906')

A compact plant for the front of the border and growing in containers. The maximum height is 50cm (19.6in) and it has a 35cm (13.7in) spread. Grow in any soil except clay, in full sun or partial shade. Avoid growing on a north-facing site as it will fail to thrive.

This herbaceous perennial has a dense, bushy habit and produces plenty of yellow flowers with a darker centre. A long-flowering plant that provides colour from spring to autumn.

Knautia macedonica 'Mars Midget'

Knautia is one of the plants in my garden that everyone admires and asks what it is. The scruffy mound of foliage is semi-evergreen, so in milder winters its leaves may remain. The pincushion flowers appear in summer on wiry stems above the foliage.

Deadhead very frequently, removing the flower stems, not just the flower heads, for a continued display through to late autumn.

'Mars Midget' is a dwarf form of knautia and reaches around 40cm (15.7in) in height, making it ideal for near the front of the border. Grow in any well-drained soil that is alkaline or neutral. Position in full sun in a west or south-facing site. It will fail to thrive in acid or clay soils. Hardy across the UK, Ireland and the rest of Europe.

Amsonia tabernaemontana

Commonly known as eastern bluestar, this is an interesting plant for all but north-facing gardens. It even has some drought tolerance for drier areas of the country.

It's relatively unfussy about soil type and will tolerate partial shade, but thrives most in full sun. The clusters of small, grey-blue flowers appear from May to July. It reaches 60cm (2ft) in height and has a spread of 40cm (15.7in). It is hardy throughout the UK and Ireland. I saw these plants at Kew Gardens and was instantly attracted to their unusual colour.

Above: Compact cheery blooms of *Coreopsis grandiflora* Solar Moon ('Mvnc1906')

Above: **Eastern bluestar (*Amsonia tabernaemontana*) is an unfussy plant with pretty blue petals**

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A small tree with pale creamy-white bracts, *Cornus kousa* 'Milky Way' provides drama and interest

Above: Unusual pale-mauve petals of *Rosa* Blue Moon ('Tannacht')

Cornus kousa 'Milky Way'

Pale creamy-white bracts smother the branches of this small tree in late spring or early summer. Growing to 600cm (19.6ft) in height and with a spreading habit, it may not be ideal for a small garden. But if you have the space, or are prepared to do some judicious pruning on a regular basis, *Cornus kousa* 'Milky Way' will provide drama and interest for much of the year.

Autumn brings fruits and the leaves turn orange and red. In winter the bark provides interest too. Grow in acid or neutral soil, avoiding peaty soils and north-facing sites. This tree is hardy across the UK, Ireland and the rest of northern Europe.

I was given quite a large plant that was transplanted into my garden almost three years ago. Although it hasn't died, it also hasn't thrived, so I am hoping next year will bring better conditions for it.

Clematis 'Helios'

Helios is the name of the Greek god of the sun and this deciduous climber is aptly named, with dangling bright yellow flowers that have a coconut fragrance. It can reach 220cm (7.1ft) height. Plant with the crown 6 to 8cm (2 to 3in) below soil level as this will encourage plenty of new growth.

'Helios' is unfussy about soil type as long as it is neutral or alkaline. Grow in full sun or partial shade. It is hardy throughout the UK, Ireland and northern Europe. Additional interest is provided by fluffy seed heads in autumn.

Rosa Blue Moon ('Tannacht')

When I first saw photos of a Blue Moon rose, I was intrigued by the pale mauve colour and didn't quite believe it. I decided to buy one to see whether the colour in the photos was correct and, to my delight, the petals were indeed a pale lilac-mauve and the flowers are sweetly scented.

It has an upright growth habit up to 90cm (35in) in height and is repeat-flowering from summer into autumn. It is unfussy about soil and situation, but will need full sun and a sheltered position to grow at its best. It is hardy across the UK, Ireland and the rest of northern Europe. Sadly, my plant didn't survive a visit from the neighbour's sheep and the local rabbit population!

Above: Bright yellow flowers of deciduous climber, *Clematis* 'Helios'

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Add an edible

Peach 'Saturne'

The fruits of 'Saturne' are often described as flat or 'doughnut' peaches. The vigour of the tree is determined by the rootstock onto which it is grafted, which means there will be a peach tree for every size of garden. In early spring it produces pretty pink flowers with pink pistils and stamens.

Peach leaf curl can be a real nuisance and potentially weaken and kill a tree over the course of a few years. This fungal disease comes in the rain between January and the end of May. To help avoid peach leaf curl, grow the tree under cover, or against a wall of the house, where it will be sheltered from much of the rain.

For trees grown under cover, it may be worth pollinating the flowers by hand. I use a small children's paint brush to gently gather some pollen from the centre of one flower and move to a different flower and stroke it against its centre. The fruits mature in early to mid-summer.

Above: The pretty flowers and, inset, fruit of Peach 'Saturne'

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Rosie says berberis has something to offer throughout the year, is a haven for wildlife and can help protect your property from intruders

It's time to bring back the berberis

Rosie Irving celebrates an easy-going shrub that gives so much for so little effort

All images unless otherwise credited: Rosie Irving

Barberry, or *Berberis spp,* are colourful shrubs that are easy to grow and maintain, but sadly they're no longer on the gardener's radar as a 'must have' these days.

I'm not sure why as they offer clusters of colourful golden flowers that buzz with bees, beautiful berries of various colours and, with the deciduous varieties, spectacularly stunning fiery leaf colours. They also offer the perfect habitat for wildlife, particularly birds.

History

The *Berberis* genus is native to various countries and regions, including South America, east, west and central Asia and central and southern Europe, and has been grown in the UK for centuries. There are around 500 known species, of which *B. vulgaris* (common barberry) is thought to have existed and been grown in Britain since neolithic times.

Two of the other most common species are *B. darwinii*, (Darwin's barberry) with its distinctive orange flowers, and *B. thunbergii* (Japanese barberry), from which the naturally occurring *B. thunbergii* f. *atropurpurea* with deep burgundy-purple leaves has come and which became extremely popular in Victorian and Edwardian

Rosie gets very excited by berberis berries

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Above: Berberis offers food and shelter to many smaller garden birds

garden designs.

B. darwinii was discovered by Charles Darwin during his voyage on the ship Beagle in 1835 and introduced to England in 1849 by Cornish plant collector William Lobb. Although *B. thunbergii* was discovered in Japan in the 1780s, it was not introduced to Britain until the 1880s.

William Lobb and other intrepid plant hunters were hired by the Exeter plant nursery James Veitch & Son to bring back interesting and exotic new plants, and boy, did they do so! The Veitch nursery was responsible for introducing an incredible 1,281 new plants and 232 orchids to cultivation in the UK.

From Exeter to Empire - how a Devon plant nursery influenced the world of horticulture

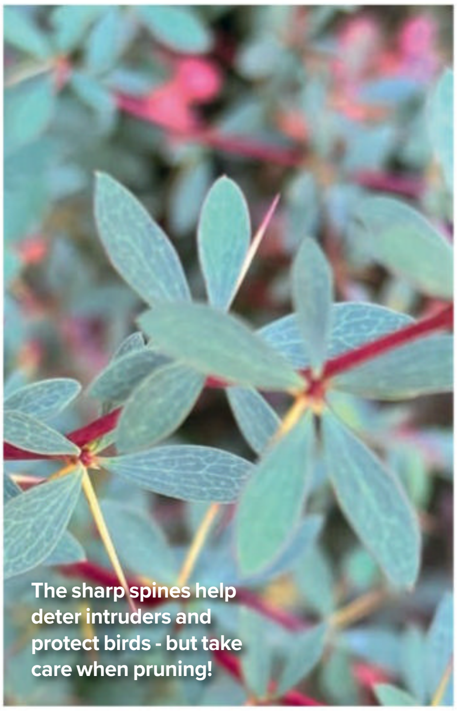
Founded in the early 1800s, Veitch's plant nursery in Devon was run by a horticultural dynasty involving several generations of the family until the 1960s. James Veitch junior came up with the original idea of employing plant hunters to travel to remote, dangerous unexplored parts of the world and bring back new plants to the UK which were then hybridised to make new varieties; cleverly he realised that novelty increased sales. This tradition continued for more than 70 years.

Hugely enterprising, Veitch Nurseries not only bought the prestigious Royal Exotic Nursery in Chelsea as a sales outlet, but also their own railway wagons so they could transport huge numbers of plants that they had grown and hybridised in Devon to their fancy new London premises that were frequented by the wealthy elite.

The family and their descendants had a huge influence on the horticultural world. Their nursery became the largest in Europe and, in 1870, the RHS Veitch Memorial Medal was introduced. It is still in existence today, awarded to individuals making an outstanding contribution to horticulture.

By 1912, Harry James Veitch had been knighted for his services to horticulture having, among other things, helped establish the RHS Chelsea Flower Show at its current venue in the grounds of the Royal Hospital Chelsea.

The nursery was eventually sold to St Bridget Nurseries of Exeter in 1969, who are still trading.



The sharp spines help deter intruders and protect birds - but take care when pruning!

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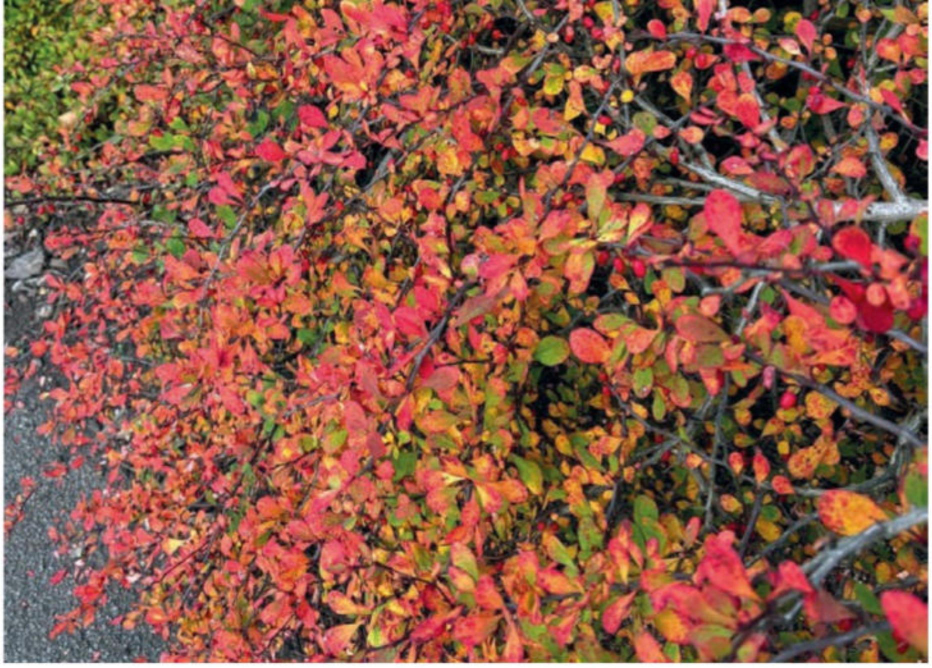
Above: *B. jamesiana* berries glistening in the sunlight

From must-have to mistrusted

The popularity of delightful berberis shrubs was seemingly guaranteed until it was discovered that *B. vulgaris* was a host to wheat stem rust, a disease affecting cereal crops.

B. vulgaris had been widely planted as hedging on farmland and orchards, but then suddenly, all around the country, arable farmers and orchard owners could be found ripping out the plants from hedgerows. As a result, its status slipped from must-have to 'mistrusted' and, from then onwards, it slipped quietly into relative obscurity.

Happily, rust-resistant wheat varieties have since been developed and *B. vulgaris* is now promoted by wildlife charities as an excellent plant to have in the garden to help many endangered species of moth that use it as a food plant, including the threatened barberry carpet moth that feeds on it alone.



B. quelpaertensis **also known as *B. amurensis var. quelpaertensis* Hailing from Korea, this shrub thrives in milder temperatures**

Above: The overall shape and changing leaf colour make barberry an excellent architectural shrub

How to grow

- Most prefer full sun but will take light shade.
- They grow well in any type of soil as long as it's well-drained and the plant is watered regularly during the first year of planting.
- To keep plants shapely and relatively short, lightly prune immediately after flowering.
- To rejuvenate an older plant, remove a third of the oldest, thickest stems at the base annually over a period of three years while the shrub is dormant.
- Severely overgrown shrubs can be hard pruned in late winter down to about 30cm (12in) above ground level.
- Hedges are best pruned in winter but can also be lightly trimmed immediately after flowering to keep them looking good.

Reasons to fall in love with barberries

The gorgeous yellow spring blooms of berberis bushes

Spring sees berberis bushes cloaked in clouds of pretty golden yellow or orange flowers, which are adored by bees, and in summer months their bright green or burgundy leaves glow in the sun. In autumn many produce a striking flourish of scarlet leaves and/or branches dripping with jewel-like clusters of beautiful berries in shades of red, pinky-apricot or blue-black.

Once established, James's barberry is not the slightest bit bothered by strong winds, poor soil or drought, and their long thorns are a definite asset if you want to provide a safe, sheltered nesting spot for birds or repel potential garden intruders.

Barberries have all the ingredients for a 21st century comeback thanks to their colour, resilience, wildlife value and easy-going charm. So let's give them a starring role again!

Above: *B. jamesiana* looking resplendent in the light

Did you know

- The berries of barberry plants are edible and often used in Middle Eastern cooking.
- Parts of the plant have been used in traditional medicine for hundreds of years.

Above: Barberry berries have long been used in Middle Eastern cooking. Do be careful to check what you have harvested is edible first

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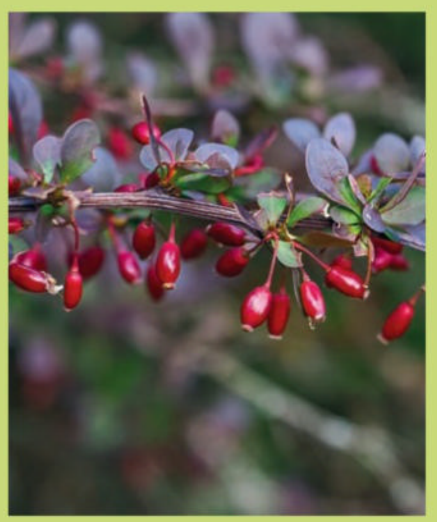
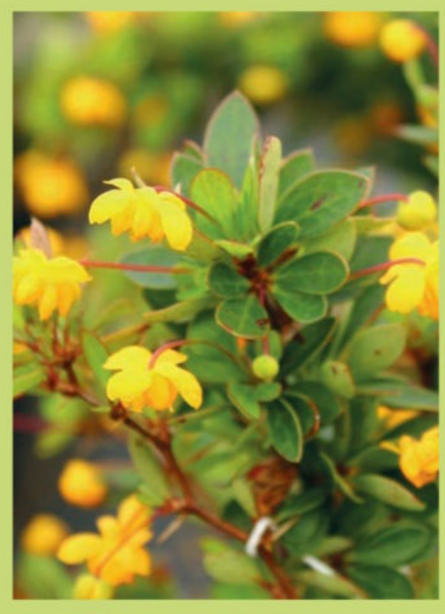
Three of the best

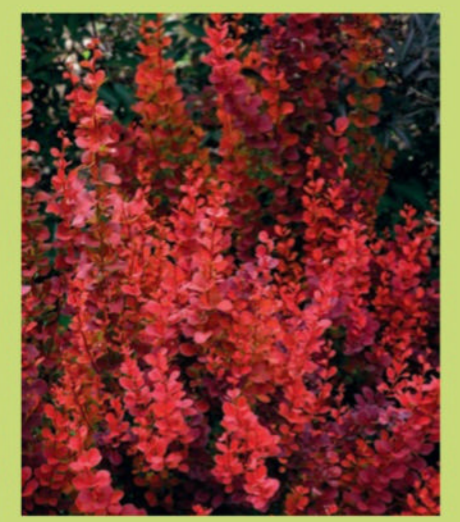


B. thunbergii* f. *atropurpurea
Height & Spread 150cm (4ft 11in)
One of my favourites, it has gorgeous deep burgundy-purple leaves from spring to autumn, when they turn vibrant shades of red and orange. Looks good in a border or as a low-maintenance hedge.

Available cheaply at this time of year from plant nurseries selling as bare-root plants. I once planted a mini copse of *B. thunbergii* f.*atropurpurea* and surrounded them with several snowy mespilus (*Amelanchier lamarckii*), all bought as bare-root saplings for a fraction of the cost of container-grown. Dreamy!



***B. microphylla* 'Pygmaea' (also known as *B. buxifolia* 'Nana' or Magellan barberry)**
Height & Spread up to 60cm (2ft)
This is a dwarf cultivar of this native South American barberry which forms a neat, rounded bush, sometimes producing yellow flowers in mid-spring followed by purple-black fruit. It has tough, box-like leaves up to 3cm long and no spines. A tough, easy-to-grow evergreen.



***B. thunbergii* 'Orange Rocket'**
Height & Spread 100 cm (3.3ft) x 50cm (19in)
This striking, relatively low-growing cultivar has a narrowish upright habit and eye-catching bright orange-red leaves which turn a deeper ruby red at this time of year.

Producing small, yellow flowers in spring and red berries in the autumn, it can be dotted among flower borders to provide cheerful leaf colour at times of the year when other flowers are scarce. Best grown in full sun to maximise leaf colour.

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Gardening's king of trivia and brain-teasers, **Graham Clarke**

Winter heathers

Heathers are the perfect low-maintenance plant. They're small, manageable, evergreen, easy-to-grow and long-flowering. However, since the height of their popularity in the late 1960s and 70s, their image has suffered and, really, I don't know why. Right now, of course, the winter-flowering varieties are about to come into their own, brightening up low beds, containers and the fronts of borders.

- Winter heather is bee-friendly. These plants are a lifeline for the few solitary bees and bumblebees (which do not store food) that are flying about during mild spells in winter and early spring.

Myth busting 1

Over the years, the distinction between heaths and heathers has become blurred, and you get both types growing in 'heather gardens'.

So, winter heathers are really 'winter heaths', and here we're looking at *Erica carnea*. In the wild it grows in conifer woodlands on the mountain slopes of central, eastern and southern Europe. It is a fine winter-flowering plant, with well over 100 cultivars (but not all are easy to find).

Myth busting 2

Not all heaths and heathers need an acid soil. Yes, the word 'ericaceous' (acid-loving) derives from the erica, but *E. carnea* is different. Unlike most ericas, which insist on an acid soil, the winter heath will also grow well in mildly alkaline conditions, making it suitable for most gardeners to grow.

Look for:

- ***E. carnea* 'Myretoun Ruby'**: dark green foliage and deep rose-pink to magenta flowers from January onwards.
- ***E. carnea* 'December Red'**: deep green foliage and pink flowers, darkening as they age, from December onwards.
- ***E. carnea* 'Ann Sparkes'**: dark yellow to orange leaves, tipped with bronze in spring and flushed crimson in winter, with rose-pink flowers, darkening to purplish-pink, from January onwards.

This fortnight in gardening history

27 Nov 1897 Swedish astronomer Anders Celsius was born. His temperature (or 'centigrade') scale – the standard for all weather and scientific work – defines 0° as the point at which water freezes, and 100° as the point at which water boils.

5 Dec 1926 Claude Monet, famous French impressionist painter and gardener, died at Giverny, the garden that he created and painted many times. He was 86.

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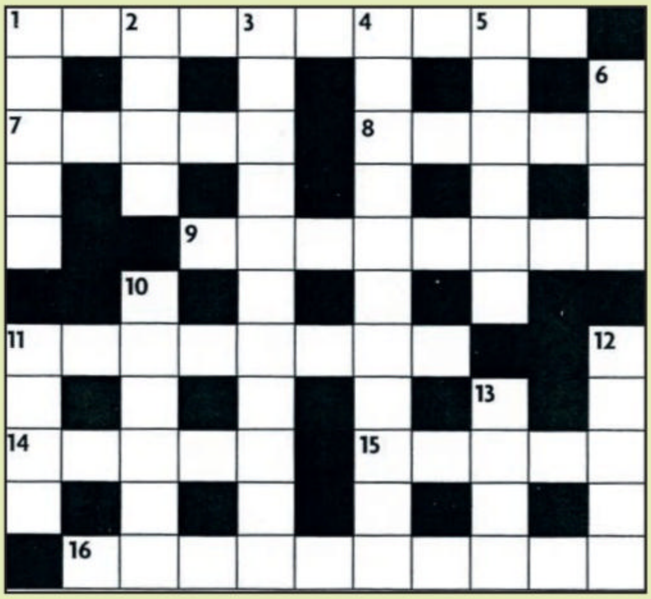
Crossword... *just for fun!*



ACROSS

1 Genus of shrub known as the beauty bush (10)

7 Norwegian playwright (1828-1906), and an old nerine cultivar name (5)

8 Bird, as in *Photinia* × *fraseri* 'Red ______' (5)

9 We're just entering it (as in *Erica carnea* '_________ Red' for example)! (8)

11 South Yorkshire town, and a variety of tree mallow (*Malva* × *clementii*) (8)

14 Taste and smell are each one of these! (5)

15 This musical instrument is like a pansy! (5)

16 The pampas grass genus (10)

DOWN

1 In the garden, one uses a pen______ or pruning ______ (5)

2 Extreme, luxuriant abundance (4)

3 *Chimonanthus praecox* is better known as this (11)

4 How much foliage? As in clover? (5,6)

5 A limb I believe I must drink! (6)

6 A knot in wood - minus the L (4)

10 Grass genus, including the giant reed (______ *donax*) (6)

12 Yellowish tropical fruit of the *Psidium* genus. (5)

13 Outer husk of a coconut used for composts (4)

ANSWERS TO CROSSWORD ABOVE

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The striking trumpet-shaped flowers of amaryllis make an eye-catching centrepiece among the festive decorations

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Amazing amaryllis

Ellen Mary explains how these statuesque plants bring drama to the home and make delightful gifts and displays

All images unless otherwise credited: Shutterstock

As the festivities start in earnest and Christmas lights twinkle, homes come alive with gift wrapping, list making and decorating for the month ahead. Outside, the garden appears to be sleeping, but there's still plenty of magic happening if you look closely.

Nature may be moving more slowly than during the growing season, but getting out to tidy beds, plant bulbs, watch robins and rake up leaves for mulch feels like such a restorative time when life indoors is so busy. Gardening during the build-up to Christmas is a time to find calm in the chaos and mindfulness with the small things. And, if you look closely, you'll see a whole lot quietly going on.

Back inside, I love to decorate with as many natural materials as possible plus plenty of colour from winter-flowering plants. From kalanchoes to poinsettias and Christmas cacti (*Schlumbergera spp*) to orchids, filling the home with their bright blooms and bracts brings me so much happiness. Amaryllis, or *Hippeastrum spp* to give them their botanical name, is absolutely my favourite. The big, dramatic flowers are such a dream and they are so very easy to grow. The trumpet-shaped blooms burst open at the top of a tall, strong stem which can often hold 10 or more flowers.

Amaryllis symbolises strength, hope and courage. The name comes from the Greek word *amarysso*, which means 'to sparkle', which is totally appropriate for this time of year. If you look really closely at the petals, there is a delicate, beautiful sparkle there. At home, an amaryllis bulb may well flower twice, especially if kept in correct conditions, but in their native environment of South America, some bulbs have flowered repeatedly for 75 years. Amaryllis is a great gift to give at Christmas.

How to grow amaryllis

The big bulbs are usually bought in autumn and winter from nurseries, supermarkets and garden centres. Amaryllis flowers are usually red, red and white, white or pink and white and some have differently shaped petals as new breeding techniques have created many variations. I am all in for the classic bright red such as 'Red Lion' (Galaxy Series) or the serene white varieties such as 'White Amadeus' or 'White Nymph'.

Bigger bulbs tend to grow stronger stems and flowers, but don't ignore smaller bulbs because in a display they are equally as beautiful.

Usually it takes six to eight weeks for the flowers to bloom, but just watching how much growth the plant puts on daily is extraordinary and even the flower buds can look really interesting. There have been times when I have potted an amaryllis bulb and they have taken fewer than four weeks to flower, so I recommend potting at least two a few weeks apart if you are going for Christmas Day flowers. Make sure the bulbs you choose are firm without any soft areas or mould and that you have a pot a little bigger than the bulb itself.

Amaryllis don't need a lot of pot space even though the bulb is big, and the roots should be able to fill the space without sitting in lots of empty compost. Mix some horticultural grit with peat-free multi-purpose compost and plant the bulb so at least one third is above the compost with its neck standing clear. Plenty of bright light is perfect for amaryllis, but avoid direct heat sources, direct sun and draughts. As the stem grows, water into the compost so it doesn't completely dry out, but overwatering will cause the bulb to rot so make sure it has good drainage and watch the watering.

Above: Amaryllis flowers have large, bright petals, most usually in shades of red and white

© Shutterstock

Above: Choose firm, healthy bulbs and plant them in peat-free compost mixed with grit for good drainage

Some varieties of amaryllis have candy-striped petals, which make them stand out among the rest

© Shutterstock

What to do after flowering

Amaryllis can bloom again, so after flowering, cut the stalk down but allow the leaves to die back naturally so they can feed the bulb. Continue watering as long as the leaves are still green and gradually reduce water as they die off, allowing the bulb to become dormant and take a rest.

Ideally, move the pot to a cool place such as a greenhouse and leave for up to 12 weeks, with shading if it's warm and sunny. After this dormant phase, bring the pot back in, repot if needed with some fresh compost and start the cycle all over again.

© Shutterstock

Above: Amaryllis like plenty of light, but keep them away from direct heat and sunlight, and out of draughts

Top tips for growing

1 Some taller amaryllis may need support with a cane to stop them from toppling over, especially when the big flower bursts open.

2 To keep the stem growing straight and not towards the light, turn the pot every now and again.

3 Prolong flowering by moving to a slightly cooler position when in full bloom.

4 After flowering and while the leaves are still green, feed with an organic fertiliser to return nutrients to the bulb for the next bloom.

5 Avoid wax-coated bulbs as these will only flower once and often not as well as bulbs grown in compost.

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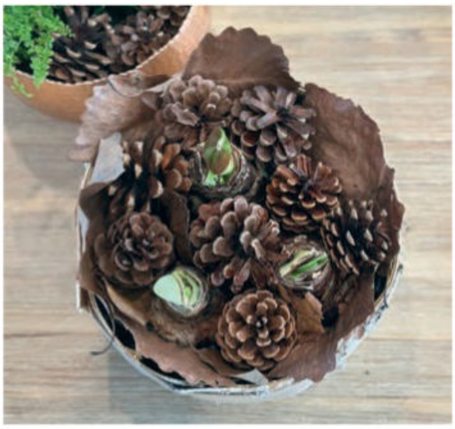
Houseplants can be teamed with colourful amaryllis blooms to add seasonal sparkle to the home

Projects with amaryllis

While growing one amaryllis bulb produces a stunning result, there are some lovely ways to spend some wellness time with your plant. Remember that the plants are toxic, so these projects are very much about crafts and mindfulness and it's a good idea to keep bulbs away from curious small children and pets.



© Ellen Mary

Above: Surround amaryllis bulbs with pretty pine cones for an attractive festive display

Project 1 – how to create a festive amaryllis display

There are two ways I enjoy displaying amaryllis. One is to plant three bulbs in one container and use them as an elaborate centrepiece, and another is to plant one with some complementary plants and festive decorations.

- Use a container of your choice such as a small wooden crate and place one or more amaryllis bulbs already potted into the crate.
- Add pine cones and moss to the surface to cover the pots from view.
- Pop in some small succulents in small pots around the top of the crate to provide extra interest (as many as you like)!
- Include some fun Christmas decorations such as baubles or colourful dogwood stems and tie around the crate with a festive coloured bow.

Project 2 – pressed amaryllis memory craft

© Ellen Mary

With such a stunning flower, I always think it's such a shame when it's finished blooming, but pressed flowers are a thoughtful way to keep them in our memory or to give to a friend. It's much easier than it sounds, just a little patience is needed.

- After the flower has faded, cut it with a small piece of stem and gently remove any moisture by patting it dry with some kitchen paper.
- Place in between some heavy books or use a flower press to flatten and dry the flower. This takes about two weeks.
- Lay the flower on some acid-free paper and lightly glue it in place if necessary. Write the name and date on the paper.
- Place in a frame of your choosing so you can display it somewhere to make you smile, glue it into a memory book - or give it as a thoughtful, homemade gift.

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Above: Pressed flowers are a lovely way to preserve memories and make thoughtful gifts

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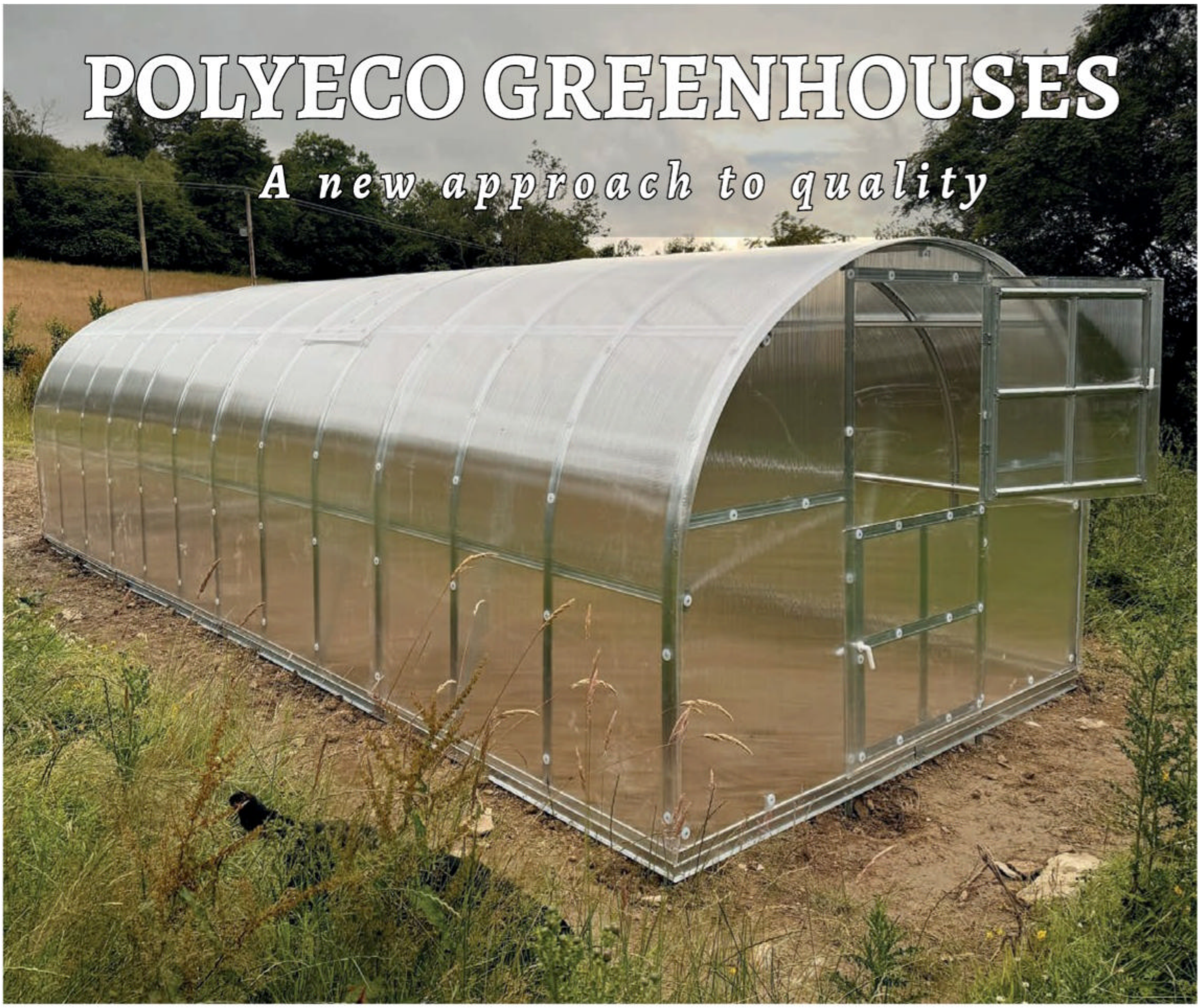

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Our gardens are home to around 40% of UK bird and mammal species

© Ben Andrew RSPB Images

How to help garden birds in winter

Our gardens are so important to wildlife - here's how to provide a wonderful, warm winter welcome

Recent research by the RHS revealed that 40% of our bird and mammal species call our gardens home, so with a long winter looming, this feels like a good time to explore how we can help all of our garden birds to make the most of our amazing outdoor spaces.

The RHS *State of Gardening Report 2025* plotted 25.8 million gardens in Great Britain, covering almost one million hectares, an area three times bigger than all UK nature reserves

© Ben Andrew RSPB Images

Birds such as redwing come to the UK in winter to make the most of the natural food sources on offer

Small birds are especially vulnerable on the coldest winter nights

© Ben Andrew RSPB Images

combined. That's a lot of living space we are providing!

We know our gardens are important to us; they bring us lots of joy, they bring us closer to nature and they can help with both our physical and mental wellbeing. But for birds, and wildlife in general, they are vital spaces providing room to breed, feed and shelter. In a world where so many species are being pushed into smaller and smaller living spaces as their natural habitat is engulfed by our desire to expand, how can we ensure that our gardens are providing the best for us and them?

Generally, small actions can make a big difference for birds. For example, some of our smaller songbirds such as robins and blue tits can lose a significant amount of their body weight while attempting to stay warm on the coldest of nights.

They are pretty good at doing this as their feathers are designed to insulate them and, instinctively, they are constantly driven to forage for food by the shorter daylight hours. But we can still provide some help.

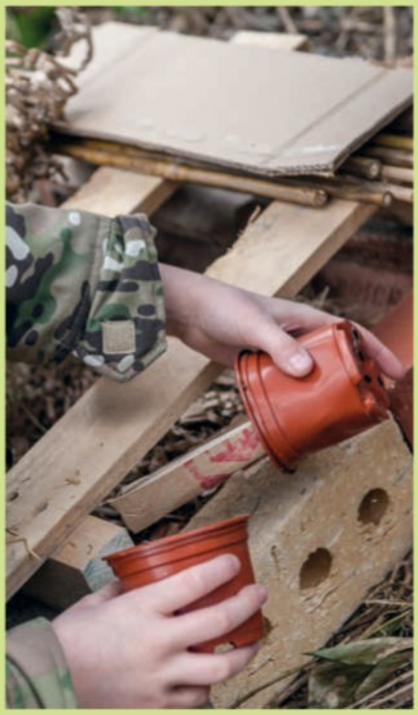
Put up a nest box. Spring and the breeding season might feel a long way away, but birds will use nest boxes to roost in on cold nights, often in pairs or even bigger numbers, making the most of their combined body heat.

Ensure shrubs give good cover, providing somewhere to shelter, and also have a good supply of berries and seeds over the colder months. Plants such as holly are excellent, providing evergreen shelter and protection from predators among their spiky leaves, while its berries offer an important food source for many birds, including thrushes such as fieldfares and redwings.

A hanging feeder in the garden with good quality seed can help birds take on some fast essential calories. Cheaper seed mixes often contain fillers which can make birds feel full without giving them the benefit of real energy. Make sure you move feeders around to prevent dropped food from accumulating underneath and clean them thoroughly at least once a week. It's best to offer fresh food and not let uneaten food sit in the feeders for more than a day or two, and adjust the amount of food based on the demand.

Why not take part in the Big Garden Birdwatch? It only takes an hour and helps to give the RSPB a better understanding of how our garden birds are faring. It takes place on January 23, 24 and 25 and registration opens on December 10 at www.rspb.org/birdwatch.

For lots more nature-friendly inspiration for your garden – sometimes, creating less work for you by doing things like leaving areas of grass a little longer – visit *www.rspb.org.uk*


ABOVE: Making a bug hotel is a great way to encourage more insects into your garden, plus it's easy and fun to make

© Nick Cunard RSPB Images

Frequently asked questions

Q I'm a teacher and we have created a new garden at our primary school. How do I encourage more birds to use it?

A In just the same way you do at home! Get the children involved in putting up nest boxes and planting wildflowers and shrubs which will provide both shelter and food for the birds. Leaving areas of longer grass or piles of dead wood can also provide habitat for invertebrates, which will also attract birds. You could also sign up to Big Schools Birdwatch at www.rspb.org.uk/whats-happening/get-ready-for-big-schools-birdwatch to see what birds are currently visiting!

Q I see many flocks of birds flying over my garden but the birds look to be different species – is this a common thing?

A Yes, many birds will join mixed flocks over the winter months for a number of reasons, including safety, help in finding food and to keep warm when roosting.

GROWING FROM SEED

with **Ruth Hayes**

In the pink with these delicious double larkspurs

Easy-going hardy annuals that will brighten gardens and homes

© Suttons

Above: *Delphinium consolida* 'King Size Scarlet' produces beautiful ruffled, pink-red double blooms on robust stems

I'm like a child in a sweet shop when it comes to hardy annuals. I'm instinctively drawn to their bright colours and the promise of easy growing to fill gaps between the perennials and shrubs that make up the framework of our beds and borders.

I especially love the ones that spread themselves around if left to mature and shed their seeds and one of my favourites is the larkspur.

These annual delphiniums are easy to grow and come in myriad shades, from pristine white through to mauve, deep indigo, pale pink and dark magenta.

Delphinium consolida 'King Size Scarlett' produces double blooms that are an opulent velvety pink-red, making it an eye-catching addition to the border.

They are best sown in winter, undercover in trays or pots of peat-free seed compost. Cover the seeds with a light sprinkling of vermiculite and place on a light, frost-free windowsill.

When the seedlings emerge, keep them well ventilated and pot them into individual modules or pots when they are robust enough to handle.

Nurture your seedlings in a greenhouse, cold frame or porch throughout winter and have horticultural fleece to hand for protection when very cold weather strikes.

Your young larkspur plants can be planted out after the last frosts and will grow to 1.2m (4ft) tall on sturdy, hollow stems.

They make a statement in the garden and are also prized by flower arrangers for their longevity in the vase.

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Let the sunshine in

Burnished blooms on towering stems

- My childhood memories of sunflowers are all of giant stems topped with dinner plate-sized, bright yellow flowers that shone down at me from the neighbour's garden.
- Times have changed and now sunflowers come in a range of varieties and colours, from smaller, multi-stemmed perennial plants to sturdy dwarf cultivars with deep red flowers.
- Thankfully, big yellow giants are still available, but next year I'm planning to grow something a bit different.
- I'm really taken with *Helianthus annuus* 'Earth Walker', which comes in a range of colours from deep brown to burnished bronze and gold.
- The plants can reach 180 to 270cm (6 to 9ft), making them perfect for the back and centre of borders and beds, and they are multi-headed so will give a profusion of flowers from midsummer and into autumn.
- These annual gems can be sown undercover in spring and planted out once the frosts have finished.
- The seeds are delicious toasted, and always leave some on the plant to feed garden birds as they prepare for winter.

'Earth Walker' is a hardy annual sunflower with rich colours

What's On

29 Nov: Hardy Plant Society Western Counties Group Meeting: Gardens are mostly about sex, death and deliciousness - a talk by James Alexander-Sinclair, Corse and Staunton Village Hall, Gloucester Road, Corse, Gloucestershire, GL19 3RQ. Details from hardy-plant.org.uk/group/western-counties

30 Nov: Bonsai Workshop at Gordale Garden Centre, Chester High Road (A540), Burton, South Wirral, Cheshire, CH64 8TF. 11am to 4pm. Drop in for free bonsai expertise and view the incredible bonsai artistry in action from Wirral Bonsai Society. Plus, if you have a troublesome bonsai at home, let the bonsai doctor help solve the problem.

1 Dec: Indigenousplants presents Plant Swap, Streatham Common Park, Streatham Common, South London, SW16 3BX. There's a full programme of events, including the plant swap, raffle, guided meditation, live performance, and interviews.

6 Dec: Pinecone wreath-making workshop, Chelsea Physic Garden Christmas Fair, 66 Royal Hospital Road, Chelsea, London SW3 4HS. 2 to 4pm, £45.

13 Dec: Patchworking Garden Project Christmas Wreath and Craft Sale, Pixham Lane, Dorking, Surrey, RH4 1QA. 11am to 1.30pm. Order your wreath by December 1 from jillyl@patchworkinggardenproject.co.uk

27 to 30 Nov: Chelsea Physic Garden Christmas Fair, 66 Royal Hospital Road, Chelsea, London SW3 4HS. There will be more than 100 stalls to browse, selling gifts for everyone on your festive list. From fine food and specialty drinks to unique homewares, clothing and accessories, plus plants, beautiful Christmas wreaths, and table decorations.

Dates and times are correct when going to press. Thanks to **pumpkinbeth.com** for the listings - check her site for more details. Please send us details of your events at least six weeks in advance to **editor@amateurgardening.com** Always check events are going ahead before leaving home.

Ask JOHN NEGUS

John is a gardening legend and here to answer your lovely questions

Filling a climbing rose with blooms

Tie the pliable new stems horizontally in spring

Q I have a two-year-old rose climbing over an arch and I don't know how to ensure that it doesn't just bloom high up but also flowers lower down. What is the best way to prune it so it flowers all over?
Doreen Rudd (via email)

A That's the trouble with climbing roses: they tend to flower at the top, leaving lower shoots bare of blossom. Pleasingly, there is a simple and effective way of resolving this. Bend all vertical shoots down to as near horizontal as possible and tie them securely in place.

But don't do it at this time of year as stems will have stiffened and are liable to break.

The best time to tackle this task, wearing thorn-proof gloves, is in late spring when sap is flowing freely and tissues are far more flexible and will bend without snapping. Even so, you have to be careful when you ease them down to the horizontal.

The result is miraculous. In late spring and early summer, new side shoots will appear along the branches and most will flower. If you practise this most years, the result will be a mass of breathtaking blossoms.

Climbing roses need to be correctly tied in to flower all over

My unusual plumbago is in the pink!

Q I bought a hardy plumbago years ago and it's had lots of babies which I either plant up in my garden or give away. I gave one to a friend and it has come up pink! In all the years I've been growing it, this has never happened before. Any idea what's going on?
Lynda Cox (via email)

A Thank you for your very clear images of *Ceratostigma willmottianum* and its pink-flowered variant.

Though this species can develop pinkish-purple blooms, it is very unusual for the whole plant to develop totally pink flowers.

I suggest that you propagate several pink-flowered shoots from cuttings to see if this colour change –an aberration due to a change in gene structure – is permanent or temporary. It would be wonderful if your cuttings yielded glorious pink blooms annually. Please let us know if, when your cutting-raised plants mature, they are garbed with blue or pink flowers.

Above: Plumbago can flower in different colours

Quick questions & answers

Above: Take care to check overwintering plants for pests

What's attacking my pellies?

Q Something is eating the leaves of pelargoniums in my greenhouse. Who is the likely culprit?
Simon Ansell (via email)

A I suspect that caterpillars are chewing your overwintering tender geraniums (pelargoniums).

The autumn was so mild that butterflies just kept on going! The best thing to do is pick them off by hand and add them to the bird table.

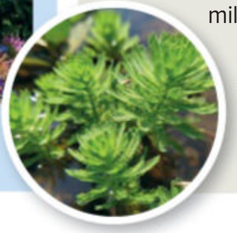
Garden birds are feeding up for winter and will be grateful for your extra bounty.

Safe weeds for your garden pond

In the October 4 issue of AG, we suggested that a reader replace invasive parrot's feather weed in their pond with *Lagarosiphon major* or curly waterweed.

It has been brought to our attention that this is also now considered an invasive, non-native species that is banned from sale.

Suitable oxygenating alternatives for garden ponds include *Ceratophyllum demersum* (hornweed) and *Myriophyllum spicatum* (spiked milfoil).



Left: Spiked milfoil is safe to use as an oxygenating pond weed

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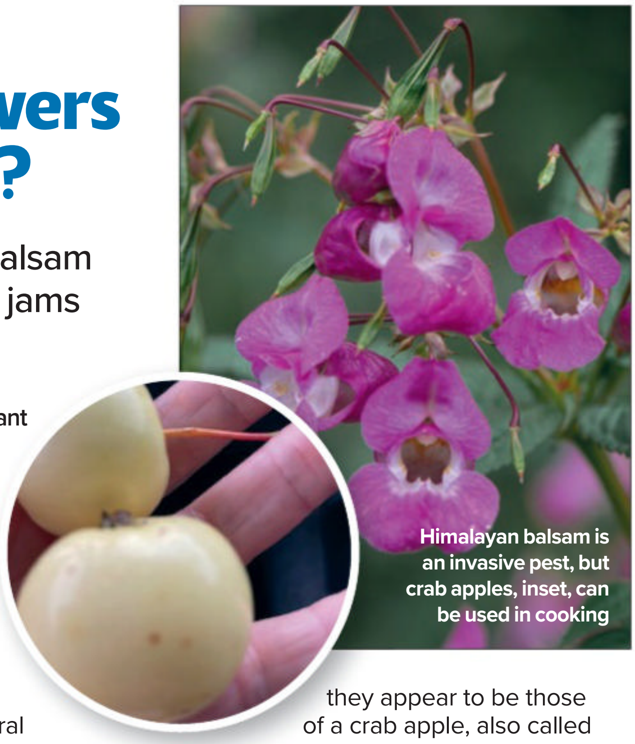
Ask JOHN NEGUS

John is a gardening legend and here to answer your lovely questions

What are these flowers and fruits?

Avoid Himalayan balsam but make delicious jams with crab apples



Himalayan balsam is an invasive pest, but crab apples, inset, can be used in cooking

Q Could you identify this plant and these fruits, please
Endanadance (via email)

A The beautiful pink-flowered plant is policeman's helmet, also called Indian or Himalayan balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*).

Unfortunately, this native of the west and central Himalayas has spread to Europe and Scandinavia where it has colonised and blocked waterways to such an extent that it is considered seriously invasive, so much so that it cannot be sold, cultivated or transported throughout the European Union. If it is growing locally and you are able to do so, uproot it and leave it to wither.

As for the fruits in your photograph, they appear to be those of a crab apple, also called wild forest apple (*Malus sylvestris*) from which all domestic apple varieties have been bred.

Pleasingly, crab apples are edible, but very sour if eaten raw, and are used for making jams, jellies, sauces and wine.

However, we recommend caution if you're thinking of consuming them as there is a small chance that you may be allergic to them.

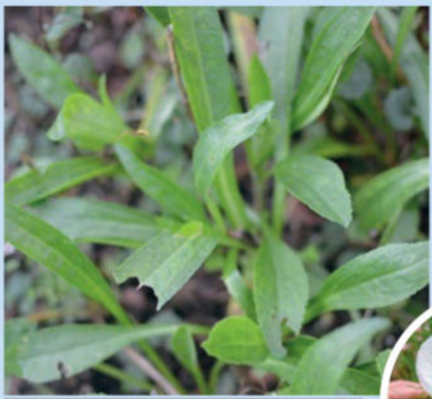
Can you name this plant through its leaves?

Q I wonder if you can tell me what this plant is? I sowed several packets of seeds this summer. This one did well but only produced leaves. Can you tell me what it is, and if it will flower next year?
Maisy Dawson, London

A The mystery plant is shasta daisy, botanically *Leucanthemum* x *superbum*. A hardy perennial, there are many fetching varieties, most of which have single, semi-double or double white flowers.

Best grown in an open, sunny border, its blooms command attention in summer. If you would like to propagate it, lift it in early autumn when flowers have faded and stems have died back. Then split the crown into well-rooted divisions.

Set clumps in organically rich soil to multiply and bloom freely.



Above: **Shasta daisies produce large white flowers that last for months**

Quick questions & answers

Stone-filled soil can cause root vegetables to become misshapen

Why have my parsnips forked?

Q Can you say why some of my parsnips have split?
Tim Austin (via email)

A The main reason for parsnips forking badly is that the tap root – the main conical one – encountered stones and the growing tip was damaged by them. This triggered development of subsidiary roots which, though edible, are tedious to prepare for cooking.

To avoid branching in future, prepare a strip of soil and remove as many large stones as you can. It may take time, but the effort in doing so is rewarded by straight, plump roots.

If stones aren't a problem in your garden, it may be that your soil may be too rich in nutrients due to a recent application of manure or fertiliser.

Why are these leaves different?

Q We grew these cosmos from seed, and their leaves are different from normal. They are beautiful and insects love them, as you can see.
Elizabeth and Robert Dalziel

A Thank you for the image of your enchanting cosmos which, I feel sure, is *C. bipinnatus* 'Cupcakes White'. Characteristically, unlike many other cosmos plants, its leaves are thin and thread-like.

Indisputably, its blooms have superlative beauty and a patch of this variety always commands attention.

Left: The leaves of *Cosmos bipinnatus* 'Cupcakes White' differ from other cosmos foliage

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Ask JOHN NEGUS

John is a gardening legend and here to answer your lovely questions

Can I pot up my chrysanthemum shoots?

Use them to make new plants to fill beds and pots

Q My chrysanthemums have grown almost to 2m (6ft) and have many buds. Small shoots have appeared at the bases of the plants - can I take these off and plant them in the greenhouse?
Peter Stevens (via email)

A I am delighted that your chrysanthemums have flourished. Next year, behead them at around 2ft (60cm) to encourage them to produce a multitude of robust flowering stems and be more manageable.

As for basal shoots, carefully remove them to avoid damaging roots and, after potting them separately, move them to a greenhouse or somewhere similar in which the temperature does not fall below 7°C/45°F.

If it turns very cold, drape them with horticultural fleece supported on canes topped with jam jars, ensuring the fleece doesn't touch the foliage.

Potted-up chrysanthemum shoots

The offshoots will grow and can be hardened off and planted out into the garden in spring when the weather starts to get warmer.

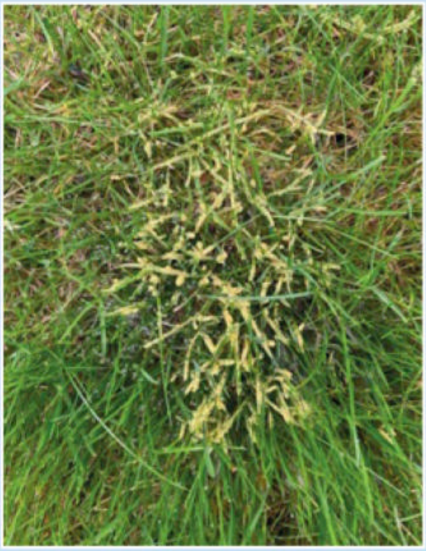
What is killing off my new lawn?

Q We had a new lawn laid a few months ago and all of a sudden this month, patches of grass developed orange secretions, which die back and leave black, unsightly patches of grass. What is it and how do I treat it?
Paul R Tempest (via email)

A Bad luck! Your newly laid lawn appears to be infected with dollar spot fungus (*Clarireedia jacksonii*). Characterised by 5cm (2in) circular, straw-coloured or golden-brown patches which eventually coalesce and die, I urge you practise the following to help eradicate it:

Spike the turf now to aerate it, and use a lawn rake to remove any thatch (dead grass that has built up around stem bases).

Additionally, feed with a nitrogen-rich lawn fertiliser in April and repeat monthly until September.



Above: Dollar spot fungus (*Clarireedia jacksonii*) can be banished by lawn care and feeding

Quick questions & answers

Leave mophead hydrangea seedheads alone until spring

When should I cut back my hydrangea?

Q Should I cut back my mophead hydrangea now or wait until spring?
Andrea MacDonald (via email)

A Assuming that it has flowered, leave the dead blooms to protect next year's flower buds from frost.

In spring, when frosts have finished or are light and not a threat to growth, remove old blooms, which will have started to desiccate, to just above the topmost bud.

At the same time, prune out thin, weak and probably dead shoots from the centre of the bush to allow air freely to circulate.

Replacements needed for potted cypresses

Q My potted cypresses near our front door are in need of replacement. But with what?
Gosia Lyson (via email)

A I urge you to replace them with a variegated osmanthus, such as *O. heterophyllus* 'Aureomarginatus', or *O. fragrans*, both of which not only resists long dry spells but tolerate light shade and are wonderfully scented.

Other shade and drought-resilient plants are *Cordyline australis* 'Torbay Dazzler', enjoyed for its brightly striped green and white leaves, and silvery-grey *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Silver Queen'.

Right: Scented osmanthus would be a wonderful potted shrub near a front door

All images unless otherwise credited © Shutterstock

Your LETTERS TO KIM

We love receiving your letters, emails and social media posts. Every message, poem, idea and comment matters. Please keep them coming. We will send out a thank you gift for every item published in the magazine as soon as we can, so do please send your address and contact details when you get in touch.

Happy houseplant tip

Kim
I tend to have my houseplants mixed together as I think that is probably what happens in nature. They all seem to get on famously and I tend not to have too many problems of single plant disease or insects.

Little watering at this time of year, I gently lift each pot to check on weight as this will tell me if they need water or not. No feeding either until next spring when growth starts again.

A bit of tidying up is a good idea, but not too much! There can be a tendency to over do it. Check on the plant requirements in terms of flowering, some plants need to be kept in smaller pots for best results.

I find this non-regimented way is quite good for a calm environment as well.

Anyway keep up the good work!
John Michael Edwards Poole, Dorset

Kim says; Thank you for telling us about your houseplants John. They bring so much joy at this time of year.

Reader John explains how he looks after his houseplants over winter

Gardener's feathered friend

Dear Kim
Here is the very cheeky robin who was following me while I was pruning roses today. Photographed on the garden bin, he also paid a visit to my boot!

It is always a joy to have avian company while I work!

Best
Sarah C Macleod

Kim says; that's so lovely Sarah - it brings so much cheer to the experience of gardening doesn't it, having a cheeky robin hopping about alongside.

Competition time

Win one of four Peckish bundles of bird care goodies worth over £250

Our friends at Peckish are offering four lucky AG readers the opportunity to win this wonderful prize which includes a selection of high-energy wild bird feed, feeding accessories, and nest boxes - everything needed to keep your feathered garden visitors happy and well-fed this winter.

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Bird feeders and feeding accessories
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Question: Which of the following is a good place to position your bird feeder?
☐ In an open space away from plants
☐ Near natural cover such as trees or shrubs
☐ Next to a water feature

☐ I have read and accept the Terms & Conditions

Competition Entry Amateur Gardening. Kelsey Publishing Ltd. The Granary, Downs Court, Yalding Hill. Yalding. Maidstone. Kent. ME18 6AL

Terms & Conditions: Entries close at 23:59 on 02/01/2026. The draw is final, and no correspondence will be entered into. Entry is free and open to UK residents aged 18 and over. Only one entry per person is permitted; bulk entries will not be accepted. There is no cash alternative, and the prize is non-transferable. In the event of loss or damage to the prize or product during delivery, Kelsey Media will provide reasonable assistance in resolving the issue. However, replacements may not always be available, and no financial compensation will be provided by Kelsey Media or their affiliates. We reserve the right to cancel the competition if circumstances beyond our control arise. By participating, you agree to comply with all rules. Upon winning, your surname and county may be disclosed. You will automatically receive the Amateur Gardening newsletter, with the option to unsubscribe at any time using the provided link. Occasionally, we may send you related information from other Kelsey titles or partners, which you can also opt out of at any time. Lastly, Westland Horticulture will have access to the entry data for marketing purposes.

Pea shoot growing tip from *AG* reader in Massachusetts

Hello Kim
I love your magazine, which I see through the Libby library AP in Massachusetts, US. I saw your request for winter indoor gardening ideas and wanted to share how I grow pea shoots. By November, our outdoor gardening is pretty well done. We have cool wet weather transitioning to cold weather so I move salad production inside.

I grow leafy sprouts and also grow pea shoots. I find micro greens tricky because of mould and damping off in our high humidity. Peas shoots grow really well and they give some nice bulk to salads and taste like fresh peas. I also like them in fried rice or ramen noodle soups.

I sprout the peas in a glass jar like leafy sprouts and then place them on a 5 to 7cm (2 to 3in) layer of potting mix with a weight for a few days. They root in and then I add a little more mix, water them and put them under a light. They also grow well in a sunny window. I use repurposed rectangular food containers and buy the seeds in 5lb (2.3kg) bags to keep the cost reasonable.

Reader Mary explains how she enjoys homegrown pea shoots

I cut 7 to 10cm (3 to 4in) for the first cut and then usually get a second cut.

Best regards,
Mary Donnelly

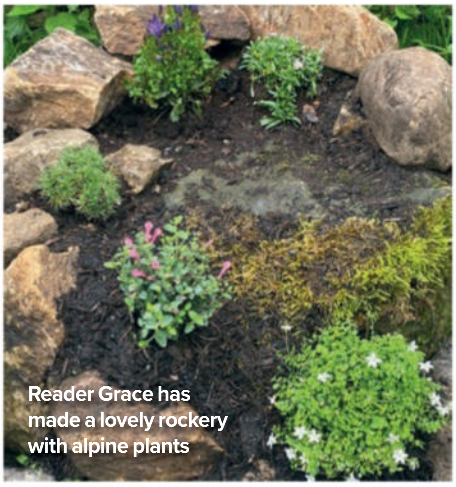
Kim says; It's lovely to think we are being read in America, and thank you for your wise winter growing tips Mary.

Homemade rockery

Dear *AG*,
Earlier this year I built a small rockery using some unwanted materials, and added in some little alpine plants. Although most of the flowers have now gone, the vibrant green foliage remains and continues to bring joy to my whole family throughout the colder months now.

Best wishes
Grace Faraday

Kim says; what a lovely homemade joyful gem of a rockery Grace.


Reader Grace has made a lovely rockery with alpine plants

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Please send us your letters, poems and musings

Your contribution is such an important part of this magazine, now and for the future.

AG is for you the people, for gardeners and proud custodians of gardens everywhere, so please do write in. We will send a gift for each letter, poem and musing published.

Address: Kim Stoddart | *Amateur Gardening* magazine | Kelsey Publishing Ltd. | The Granary | Downs Court | Yalding Hill | Yalding | Maidstone | Kent | ME18 6AL

Email: editor@amateurgardening.com

Great gardener Christmas gift ideas

Here is a range of present ideas for keen gardeners from the team at *AG* mag

Pretty and practical accessories from Burgon & Ball

Beautiful indoor plant watering can

This joyful mini watering can from Burgon & Ball for indoor plants is attractive in its own right for a windowsill display and perfect for use with houseplants all year round. Its elegant spout helps avoid spills and ensures water goes into the pot and it's made from strong galvanised steel with a tough powder coating.
RRP £22.49 ***www.burgonandball.com***

Wire-free robot mowers

These are all the rage now so if you are thinking about investing, Christmas might be the perfect time to do so. Here are a few popular options.

Eufy Robot Lawn Mower E15

The E15 uses vision technology and maps your garden to plan the best mowing path. It uses high precision cameras to eliminate the need for wires and is able to accurately detect and avoid obstacles to help you achieve fuss-free, beautiful mowing. This machine can cover a maximum area of 800 m^2

It also comes with many other features including GPS tracking to help prevent theft
RRP £1,499.00 ***www.eufy.com***

Eufy Robot Lawn Mower E15

Segway Navimow X350E

If you have a bigger garden, this top-tier robot mower provides wire-free mowing up to 5,000m^2. It features enhanced navigation, can handle uneven terrain more readily and has many other intelligent features besides. It is ideal for large, complex gardens and quietly works away to provide a professional no-fuss finish.

There are many more attractive features besides, including object avoidance, easy operation, robust security, effective route planning, and tough wheels for uneven surfaces.
RRP £3,199
www.segwaynavimow.co.uk

The Segway Navimow X350E

Above: Choose from Sussex Trugs' South Down Contemporary range for an elegant must-have gift this Christmas

Cobra WS70L path and weed sweeper

Wonderful wheeled path and weed sweeper

This Cobra WS70L can quickly do what would take hours by hand with its powerful Loncin engine and 70cm sweeper which helps to remove weeds on hard surfaces. It comes with nine rotating brushes and a safety guard for effective pathway clearance.

RRP £419.99 ***www.cobragarden.co.uk***

Sensational sweet pea tin gift set

This lovely gift set of Easton Walled Gardens sweet pea seed mix and a keepsake tin provides the perfect stocking filler for Christmas.

Each mix has a different focus, which will evoke memories of Easton Walled Gardens from days gone by to the present day. The set comes bound with a pretty ribbon.

£12.00 ***www.visiteaston.co.uk***

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RRP from £81 ***www.sussextrugs.com***
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Cordless hand pruner - the STIHL GTA 30

This powerful and versatile tool is perfect for everything from trimming branches and shrubs to cutting up garden waste and tacking small DIY jobs with ease.

It's easy to use and lightweight and comfortable to handle with non-slip rubberised handles and a 15cm guide bar, providing extra reach. The GTA 30 is a cordless pruner and it comes with two batteries and a quick-working charger.

This pruner weighs 1.5kg, so it's easy to handle and manoeuvre – making it ideal for gardeners of all abilities.

RRP £289 ***www.stihl.co.uk***

STIHL GTA 30 cordless hand pruner

Make your own garden clippings

Webb shredder

Mulching beds and borders helps protect soil and making as much compost as possible saves money and feels good, so this quieter shredder from Webb can help you turn small branches into neat chippings for ease of use.

It has a powerful 2800w motor and a cutting capacity of up to 45mm and can effectively cut through piles of garden waste in minutes.

The shredder comes equipped with wheels to help you move it to a convenient position in your garden and it has lots of safety functions for peace of mind.

This easy-to-use shredder will have you boosting home-made compost and mulch material supplies in no time. It also comes with a three-year guarantee.

RRP £209.99
www.webbgardenpower.co.uk

Get in touch if you'd like to suggest a product for these pages
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PLANT WATCH

With **Michael Perry**

Exciting recommendations from our expert plantsman

These delightful, new rosy-hued cyclamen survive low winter light levels and have resistance to grey mould

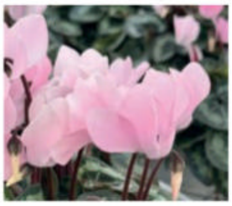
5 of the best new cyclamens

Brilliant pops of colour from these reliable favourites

For more than six decades, Morel Flowers in France has been at the forefront of cyclamen breeding, combining French horticultural tradition with innovative genetic development. Based in the sunny South of France, Morel's expertise has shaped varieties that thrive across the UK, and each year I am lucky enough to visit its nursery and discover the latest types.

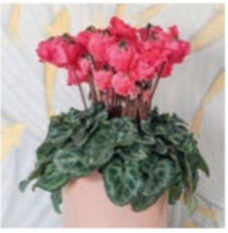
Every cyclamen is raised for vigour, uniformity, unique colour richness and lasting performance, ensuring the commercial growers are happy, but that the plants also perform for gardeners. Morel's dedication to quality and beauty continues to set the standard for cyclamen excellence worldwide. Here's a little peek into the newest developments in *Cyclamen persicum* and *C. hederifolium* from Morel Flowers which could hit your local garden centre over the next year or so.

All images © Michael Perry



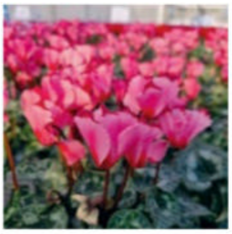
Metis® Rosy Glow® exp (Metis Series)

I am totally in love with the soft pastel pink of the petals, which are reminiscent of Japanese cherry blossoms. An indoor-outdoor cyclamen which combines elegance with performance, it has low sensitivity to botrytis (which makes watering a little easier) and strong winter vigour. A dazzling specimen, which consistently gives those *sakura*-shade blooms and healthy, silver-etched foliage. It's a rather refined choice for commercial growers and gardeners alike.



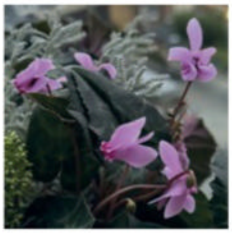
Metis® Clochette® Salmon exp (Metis Series)

With its beautiful bell-shaped flowers in intense salmon, this one is bound to get some attention on the garden centre bench! Those delicate fringed blooms are ideal for late-autumn containers outdoors, and like all Metis genetics, it has dependable growth and long-lasting appeal.



MIDI+® VICTORIA Salmon exp

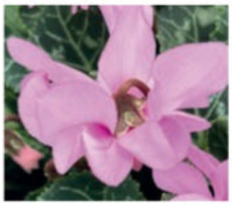
Check out these dark salmon flowers, each with their own distinctive 'Victoria' crown. Vigorous in both cold and slightly warmer conditions, this series can work well in autumn and winter, and gives abundant flowering and reliable performance. A robust variety, for window boxes or windowsills.



Lify® Series

A new direction for the world of cyclamens, Lify® Series celebrates the low woodland types, often referred to as 'botanical'.

Lify ® is a range of *Cyclamen hederifolium* types with compact, uniform growth and vibrant, long-lasting flower displays, albeit not in the profusion that modern hybrids give. However, here you allow the foliage to shine too, it's highly decorative. Super resilient plants that are easy to manage, the Lify ® Series offers excellent performance, not just below trees or shrubs, but also in mixed containers on the patio.



Petit Moulin®

These fun blooms evoke the movement of a pinwheel, but the real secret is the fact they are double-layered and each flower can last almost 100 days.

Compact plants have a great vigour and flower endlessly, with true garden appeal. With its strong performance in both indoor and outdoor environments, Petit Moulin® adds a unique touch of creativity and charm to any collection, and it's already becoming a bit famous on social media.

mrplantgeek.substack.com

TOBY'S TALKING
SPRING BULB SUCCESS

From tulips and hyacinths to anemones and daffs, spring bulbs promise weeks of beauty and perfume all emerging from the neatest packages

How to get the best from your spring bulbs

All images unless otherwise credited: Shutterstock

Toby explains how to plant and protect these treasures from squirrels

Precious things come in small packages... but I prefer the big ones! And hot off a delivery van, I've a huge box, brimful of precious little packages. No, it's not a year's supply of 'Hortihunk' talc (until you've tried, don't knock it!), but my bumper delivery of spring- flowering bulbs.

Opening a box of bulbs is always exciting. There's the sweetshop rustle of the paper bags, the earthy aroma of the bulbs and their weird and wonderful shapes and sizes.

They have an 'it came from outer space' look, but in each and every capsule is the promise of spring that's just a season away.

From anemones to zantedeschias (or calla lilies if you prefer), bulbous plants share the same survival method: hunkering inside fleshy storage units when the conditions above ground don't suit. Surprisingly, they aren't related but have evolved from a range of plant families, in parallel, and developed the ability to survive during summer drought or when an overhead canopy of deciduous trees robs them of light.

In the lily clan are, er... lilies (obvs) but also the tulips and fritillary. The *Amaryllidaceae* contains snowdrops, daffodils and the 'onion' *Allioideae*

Toby Buckland makes the most of the last days of November

Whatever their size and shape, bulbs will stay happily hunkered down in the soil until it is their time to grow and shine

Above: Mice and squirrels love eating crocus bulbs so follow Toby's top tips, below, for keeping them safe

subsection of chives, garlic and ornamental alliums, while the iris group has crocus, crocosmia and iris.

Like the difference between true bulbs which are built of swollen leaves, while corms consist of stem bases or rhizomes that form from swollen stems, this intel is botanically interesting, but of little practical value. What is useful, though, is how to store, plant and care for bulbs.

All planted in one go

I plant all of mine - alliums, daffs, tulips etc on the same day, in one go, for the obvious reason that it reduces the risk of digging up or chopping through earlier plantings.

The downside of this 'one-go' method is that you have to buy the bulbs at once or at least wait until they've all arrived through the post before you can get started, and this throws up the issue of safe storage. Like potatoes kept for too long in a kitchen cupboard, bulbs stowed indoors soon start to dry up and shrivel, so I put them outside but under a cover where the moist autumn air stops the contents drying out. Providing you patrol for mice, they can safely stay like that for weeks.

Above: Toby plants all his spring bulbs at once to reduce the risk of disturbing them while excavating the soil for others, later on

© Toby Buckland

The traditional bulb-planting window coincided with when the summer bedding was cleared and replaced with winter pansies and forget-me-nots in early autumn. But it can be left much later, especially now that climate-changed November feels like/has become the new October.

This tardy planting time suits the tulips, which if planted earlier are prone to tulip fire, the distorting fungal disease that attacks the leaves and flowers. It occurs when tulips start into growth in autumn, but if you plant after the first frost in November, lower temperatures ensure the bulbs stay dormant and the cold kills the sleeping fungal spores that sit on the soil surface.

Another way to avoid tulip fire is to plant deep so that the bulbs sit below 15cm (6in) of earth,or plant through ground-huggers like periwinkle, bugle, or even lawn grass. As the tulip rises, the skirt of ground-hugging foliage acts as a living mudguard, stopping rain from splashing the deadly fungal spores onto the tulip leaves.

How to outwit bulb-nibblers

Squirrels are another threat as they have taste for both tulips and crocuses. Should one of these fluffy tailed marauders find a fresh planting, they will destroy a whole display.

Deep planting 15cm (6in) for tulips and 10cm (4in) for crocus) helps because it puts the bulbs out of reach of all the lazy squirrels, though laying chicken wire over the soil surface or pots offers a more sure protection. Choose a mesh with 50mm (2in) holes that stop the cheeky squirrels digging down but allow the bulbs to rise, and disguise with mulch.

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Calla lily, also known as arum lily and *Zantedeschia spp*, is an exotic-looking plant that can be planted indoors now and grown in the garden from spring onwards

Masking the scent of the bulbs after planting also helps. I dig a hole and drop the bulb in, straight from a bucket, so that the skins never touch and leave a scent-marker on the soil surface. Tossing them in the air and planting where they land ‘for a natural look’ might be fashionable, but it’s akin to putting a sign up that says ‘squirrel food buried here’.

You can also mask the scent after planting - useful to know if a squirrel pays a visit after they’re in the ground.

Above: If you buy bulbs at different times, good storage will keep them safe until you are ready to plant them

Above: Toby suggests keeping bulbs off the ground before planting so their scent doesn't spread and attract nuisance nibblers

Squirrels navigate through their noses and a dusting of chilli powder (or go nuclear with 'Hortihunk' talc) throws them off the scent! Even better is mulch of pine needles as their aroma lasts even after heavy rain.

Deep planting is worth it

Anti-squirrel defences aren’t necessary for daffodils and alliums, but I still plant deep. For the alliums, I plant four times the bulb’s height to help keep the tall lollipop stems anchored and upright. The daffodils go in 10 to 15cm (4 to 6in) down (depending on whether they’re big or small-bulbed varieties) as this keeps the moisture-loving bulbs below the dry soil at the surface.

Planting deep isn’t easy, especially with a trowel, so I use a small border spade. First I chop into the soil and then create a hole by levering back on the handle. The blade being 12.7cm (5in) wide makes space for one to three bulbs in one go, and I then slide out the spade and firm the earth with the bottom of my boot.

Most bulbs, including crocuses, tulips, snakeshead fritillaries and daffs, look more impactful when clustered together and in groups. Never spread them or dot thinly through a border or lots of pots as they will look a bit lost. Alliums are the exception; plant to give space around them and show off the individual sculptural globes. But, again, cluster them where they are seen and enjoyed in one view. When planting to create a stunning bulb display, more is definitely more!

GARDEN MUSINGS

with **Bob Flowerdew**, long-standing *AG* contributor, broadcaster and all-round expert.

How to reliably label plants

Bob suggests some thrifty, novel and longer-lasting ways to ensure you know what you have growing, and where

Marjoram
Oregano
Thyme
Rosemary
Mint
HERBS

Bob offers lots of ideas to help identify plants in the garden

© Shutterstock

It can seem a chore to write a label, even though you know one will be useful, as anyone with a deep freezer full of home-grown produce can testify! Although we're often sure we won't forget what something is, we sometimes do.

Naturally, there are some plants that are so obvious they need no label, some so recognisable you know them even as wee seedlings. Hollies are a good example. However, if you plant one holly you will probably remember its varietal name, but if you plant several you're going to need labels. Likewise, any collection, bed or border, especially those with many similar varieties or species.

Yet we all know the problem - if labels come with the plants, the name fades (traditionally though, the nursery's name remains forever) or the label falls to bits, falls off, or simply can't be found. Standard labels fare little better, nothing remains legible after a year or two and those common plastic ones eventually get brittle and break up.

Regardless of what the label's made from, the writing fades or washes off. I've tried all sorts! A soft 2B drawing pencil lasts longer than almost everything else, but even so fades with the years.

Bob's longer-lasting label idea

Which is why for more-permanent labels, I've taken to cutting aluminium strips from cans, thick trays and, best of all, venetian blinds. Got one from a skip and it's brilliant, makes huge labels that are easy to cut, write on, find, and read. Now, the cunning twist with metal labels is to write on them twice; first with any half-suitable marker, then again with a dead ballpoint pen to emboss the letters (easier if backed with a piece of plank while writing). Now you will always be able to decipher the letters and can 'top up' again with a marker.

Of course, labels will still go astray: I had a huge collection of strawberries in tubs de-named, with every label 'blown out by the wind'. Was it the kids? No, it was the birds, and I spotted one in the act. So now I use 'guaranteed to stay put labels' - traditional wooden clothes pegs with metal springs.

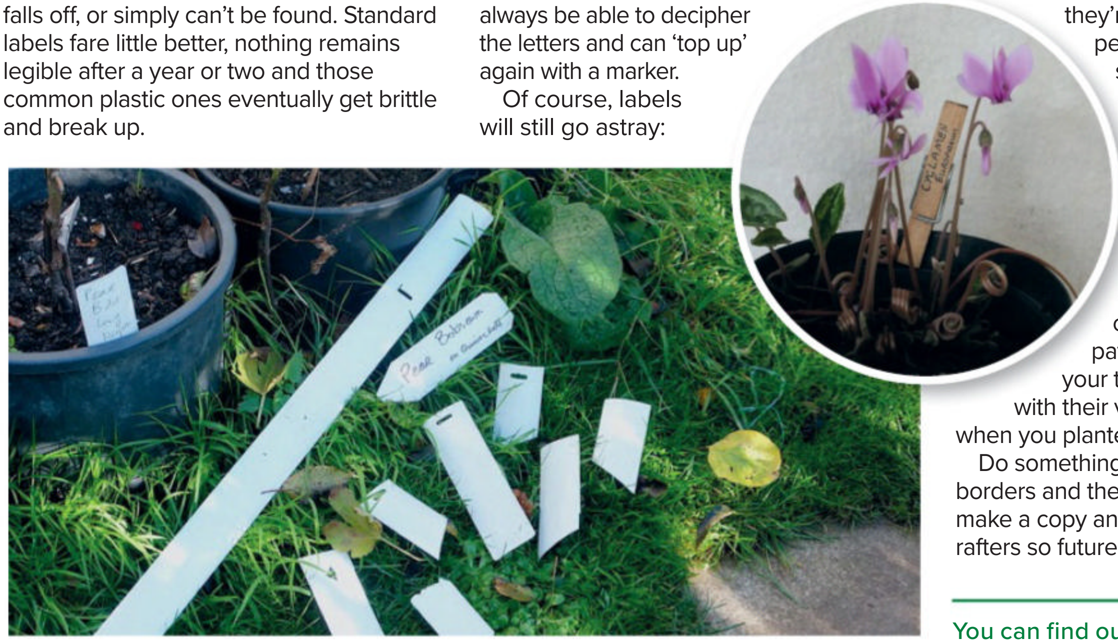
These are easy to write on and then are simply clipped to the edge of pots or trays, to a stick at the end of a row or on a stub of dead wood on a plant. With too strong a grip for birds to pull off, these work well, stay put and are inexpensive.

Keep a written record

Sadly, clothes peg wood does not endure for a long time and after several years it softens and rots, so out of doors they're little use for really permanent labels on plants such as roses, shrubs and fruit trees. The solution, therefore, is a plan on paper using a notepad, exercise book or unused diary that's kept in a dry place. Make a simple plan with obvious key points such as doors, corners of walls, gates and paths. Mark the position of your trees, shrubs or whatever with their variety, and maybe the date when you planted them.

Do something similar for beds and borders and then be super thoughtful and make a copy and nail this to your home's rafters so future folks may also know them.

You can find out more about Bob via his website **www.bobflowerdew.com**



© Bob Flowerdew

Above: Bob's venetian blind labels and, inset, wooden clothes pegs

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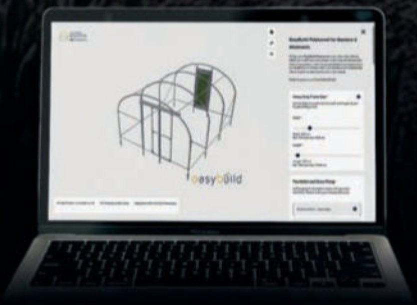

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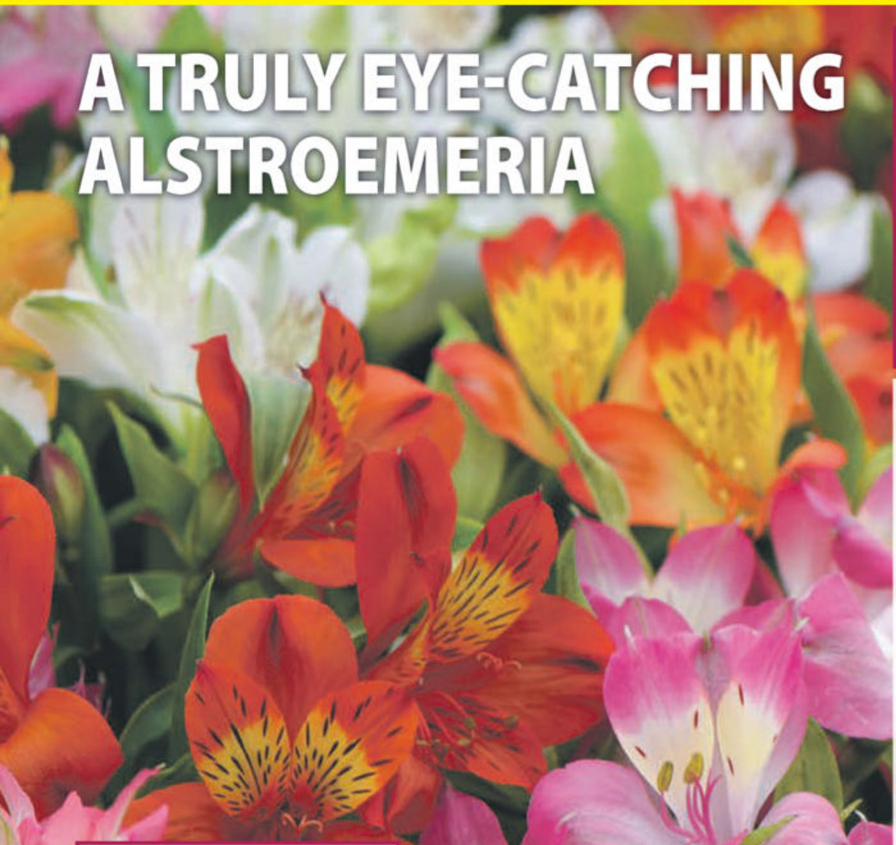

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